



# DRIVING TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

Foreign Affairs and the 2030 Agenda

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## FOREWORD

The great challenges of our time – climate change, migration and political instability – as diverse and complex as they are, all have one thing in common: they know no boundaries. We will not manage to find purely national solutions to them. We will only master them if we cooperate internationally. The 2030 Agenda and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals provide us with a framework and orientation. They guide us in our efforts to meet these major challenges. What we need is "Diplomacy for Sustainability".

The Federal Foreign Office believes that one of its most important tasks is to help the United Nations implement the 2030 Agenda and bring all stakeholders – states, as well as non-state actors such as NGOs, companies, academia, religious communities and representatives of civil society – around one table in order to discuss potential solutions. Our network of missions abroad allows us to support this dialogue in many countries and provide food for thought on sustainable development. The G20 process, which is marked by a lively exchange with business, think tanks and NGOs, illustrates the role foreign policy can play. The format for the G20 Foreign Ministers Meeting was established during the German Presidency: at the first meeting in Bonn in February 2017, both the Foreign Ministers and UN Secretary-General Guterres emphasised the importance of a rules-based international order for fair globalisation. Under the motto "Shaping the global order – foreign policy beyond crisis management", the implementation of the 2030 Agenda was one of the key issues discussed. It is now an established part of the G20 processes.

This volume specifically explores what contributions foreign policy can make on the road to achieving sustainable business practices and ways of life. The following articles contain proposals and provide guidance. They should inspire us all to work with actors around the world to initiate and boost the necessary changes and keep winning over new like-minded partners.

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The 2030 Agenda is a unique accomplishment of multilateralism. Foreign policy must help protect the global commons and carry forward the transformation the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim for. This essay series highlights some of the action areas for foreign policy.



# I. LEADERSHIP FOR THE SDGS: WHY FOREIGN POLICY MUST RECHARGE MULTILATERAL COOPERATION NOW

BY OLI BROWN (CHATHAM HOUSE) AND STELLA SCHALLER (ADELPHI)

The SDGs set out a powerful vision for a better world, but action since 2015 is not delivering that promise. Foreign policy practitioners are in a unique position to help advocate for and assist in the implementation of the SDGs. Given that the SDGs and foreign policy want to achieve the same things – stability, peace and prosperity on a healthy planet – delivering them should be seen as a litmus test for the effectiveness of foreign policy in the twenty-first century.

## 2015: THE YEAR OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

2015 was a landmark year for international cooperation. In the space of one year a slew of ground-breaking agreements were signed: the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Accord on Climate Change, the Iran nuclear deal, the Addis Ababa Agreement on Financing Sustainable Development and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. At the time, many of us assumed these were milestones towards a community of nations that, finally, would be able to tackle some of the world's most intractable problems more decisively.

## A NEW MODEL FOR DEVELOPMENT

The 17 SDGs represent the world's most comprehensive ever plan for planetary health and human development. The 169 targets that flesh out the goals are ambitious, precise and (mostly) achievable. And the 224 indicators aim to describe the 'who, what, where and when' of a global vision for a sustainable future. Together they set out a roadmap for the five 'Ps': People, Planet, Peace, Prosperity and Partnership.

The SDGs succeed the Millennium Development Goals which helped crystallise and drive remarkable progress in many parts of the world. Since 2000, more than a billion people have pulled themselves above the extreme poverty line of USD 1.90



A view of the General Assembly following the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda. The 17 SDGs established by the 2030 Agenda were prepared in a thorough and inclusive international negotiation process following the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012 (or Rio+20 Summit) and replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

per person per day. The proportion of families living in extreme poverty fell from 26.9 per cent in 2000 to 9.2 per cent in 2017. Overall, people are living healthier and better lives than at any time in history.

Unlike the Millennium Development Goals, a United Nations developed prescription for the developing world which ran from 2000 to 2015, the SDGs are universal. This universality could be considered a recognition that all countries have made progress, but that all countries can also do better. The SDGs challenge the traditional idea of development where 'developed' countries provide aid to poorer, 'developing' states.

Instead, they recognise that all countries are somewhere on a spectrum of development. All countries have a responsibility to improve the lot of their own citizens. And the ways they do so can be compared, even if the starting points, and methods are far apart. This is a subtle but profound distinction. Sweden has to promote clean mobility just as much Swaziland. Cameroon needs to improve primary education, but then so do Canada and Chile. The SDGs remind us that all countries are on the same journey.

## A NEW CHALLENGE FOR FOREIGN POLICY

The SDGs and foreign policy share many objectives: lowering forced migration, preventing conflict, reducing the need for humanitarian aid, countering violent extremism, and promoting foreign trade and economic empowerment, to mention just a few. If

***While traditional foreign policy has often been reactive, the SDGs embody an approach that is fundamentally preventative.***

they are fully implemented, the SDGs will have monumental foreign policy implications. They promise to change the political economy of resource use, alter trading and development relationships, and improve human security.

However, while their desired destinations – peace, security, prosperity – look very similar, the routes that the SDGs and foreign policy employ to achieve their objectives may, at the outset, appear different. The SDGs embody an approach that is fundamentally preventative, putting in place the investment, capacities and governance to forestall problems.

Traditional foreign policy, on the other hand, has often been reactive, fighting fires as they appear. However, these distinctions are narrowing, as foreign policy experts are increasingly recognising that effective foreign policy needs to be both preventative as well as responsive.

## THE RUBBER MEETS THE ROAD

The SDGs underwent a lengthy consultation process prior to their conclusion in 2015. But, as exhaustive as their development was, it is in their implementation that the real test lies.

***The SDGs are non-binding, and thus require strong political will and leadership for their achievement.***

Now is when investment needs to be scaled up. Now is when political priorities must relentlessly focus on achieving the targets and stubbornly working on all of the indicators.

However, the mechanisms to make that happen are extremely weak. The SDGs are non-binding. At best, they are held in place by a mixture of soft power, patchy domestic legislation and weak peer pressure mechanisms like the Voluntary National Reviews where countries present their own progress for international comment.

As the celebrations around the signing of the goals fall into memory and the politicians who signed them have moved on, there is less and less moral pressure on leaders to adhere to them. Empty promises are easy for politicians to make, especially

when the reckoning of their success or failure in 2030 will be beyond the ends of many of their careers. Increasingly, the politicians tasked with implementing the goals are not those that agreed to them. More than ever, the SDGs need sturdy political will and brave political leadership to ensure the ambitious promises are delivered.

## THE GOALS ARE FACING HEADWINDS

The implementation of the SDGs faces daunting challenges. Some of these are of their own making, but other challenges have reared their heads in the fast-changing political environment that has roiled global politics since 2015 – in particular the rise of a form populist politics that appears to reject multilateral cooperation as a desirable goal of foreign policy.

The first problem is that we still do not have the right tools to properly monitor our collective progress in implementing the SDGs. Nearly four years after the goals were signed, only around 100 of the 224 indicators are fully agreed. These are the so-called 'tier 1' indicators, which have an internationally established methodology with data regularly produced for at least 50 per cent of countries and the 50 per cent of the populations where the indicator is relevant. Even where we have indicators and data, the most vulnerable populations, often those in fragile and conflict-affected countries, are rarely included in the collection of data. In essence, this means that the SDGs are already more than one quarter of the way through their implementation but that there is still no agreement on how to judge progress for dozens of the targets. This could undermine the credibility of the goals as well as the efforts needed to achieve them.

***SDG implementation faces daunting challenges, namely the lack of proper tools to monitor implementation, the wide-ranging nature of the SDGs and the rise of populism globally.***

The second is the inherently wide-ranging nature of the SDGs. On the one hand they create a holistic, one-stop plan for a better world. But on the other, their breadth – covering everything from extreme poverty to international partnership via a hundred other issues – means that the SDGs often seem like they are trying to be all things to all people. They verge on becoming diffuse and vague. The danger is that when everything is a priority, nothing is prioritised.

Few people can actually recite the 17 goals from memory, even professionals in the development world who work on SDG-related projects every day. Moreover, the range and complexity of the policy issues they tackle means talking about the goals often descends into obscure technical jargon further and further removed from what the man or woman on the street might be able to relate to. This is important because implementing the SDGs is primarily a domestic challenge for every country,



Over three years down the road, the speed of transformation is lagging. 2.6 billion people have gained access to improved drinking water sources since 1990, but 663 million people are still without.

and a large percentage of the investment of time and money required to achieve the goals will need to come from domestic sources. If the SDGs are removed from daily realities, they will struggle to mobilise actions or votes.

The third, and perhaps most daunting, challenge is the rapid, worrying growth in populist nationalism around the world. One characteristic of populist politics on the right and the left is the inclination to pull back from multilateralism out of a sense that the 'common man' has lost out in the process of globalisation and that global elites are driving its shadowy agenda. Since 2015, people have repeatedly voted for populist leaders or decisions that explicitly renounce a multilateral approach to common challenges: Brexit in the UK, Trump in America, Duterte in the Philippines, Salvini in Italy and Bolsonaro in Brazil. Far-right populist parties are in power, or sharing power, in seven EU nations. Countries have pulled out of key agreements like the Paris Agreement or the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. Jair Bolsonaro has even threatened to pull Brazil out of the UN. Meanwhile, Donald Trump's hostility to the body is widely documented.

These positions attract a huge amount of media attention, but arguably a greater impact may come from the 'chilling' effect on other leaders and initiatives. Government policy in many places seems to be becoming more inward-looking, more isolationist, although it is not clear that if this is a passing phase or an enduring pivot in global politics. If this is indeed the beginning of a slippery slope towards nativism and populism at home and a beggar-thy-neighbour politics abroad, then it is entirely possible things will get worse before they get better.

## PROGRESS IS LAGGING AND UNEVEN

So, it is perhaps not surprising that while there has been progress towards achieving some of the SDG targets, that progress remains very uneven. Overall the world is not moving fast enough to meet the ambitious 17 goals by 2030. The level of funding for the implementation of the SDGs is insufficient. It is estimated that achieving the SDGs will require an annual investment in the region of USD 5-7 trillion per year across all sectors and industries. The investment gap in developing countries alone is estimated at USD 2.5 trillion per year.<sup>1</sup> The countries where the SDGs are furthest off-track are those most affected by conflict and fragility.

*Funding for the implementation of the SDGs is insufficient, and those countries that are furthest off-track from the SDGs are those that are most affected by conflict and fragility.*

Meanwhile, violent conflicts and climate change have contributed to the rise of world hunger and the forced displacement of millions of people. Inequality is growing around the world. 617 million children are either out of school or coming out of school lacking basic literacy and numeracy.<sup>2</sup> Environmental degradation continues to accelerate in many places around the world. Unsafe drinking water and poor sanitation are major contributors to global mortality, resulting in 870,000 deaths in 2016. Each year between 6 and 7 million people die prematurely as a result of poor air quality.<sup>3</sup> Food insecurity is rising: in 2017 global hunger and most dimensions of malnutrition increased for the third year in a row.<sup>4</sup> On current trends, there will be more than 3 million preventable child deaths in 2030.

## FORK IN THE ROAD

Clearly the promise of the SDGs is not being fully realised. We need to recognise that there is no path dependency in the SDGs. Just because they have been signed does not mean they will be automatically implemented (see essay #3 on the politics of implementation). The universality of the SDGs means they are owned by no-one in particular. As things stand, the SDGs risk becoming rudderless, without anyone ensuring that their bold promises are delivered on.

It seems the world is facing two very different possible futures: one is where the SDGs manage to stay relevant and compelling, and drive a new model for sustainable development, both at home and abroad.

But there is another future where the SDGs – perhaps a once-in-a-generation chance to implement a commonly agreed vision for a better world – fall prey to short-term and short-sighted political currents. We may look back on 2015 as the high-water mark of multilateralism characterised by a naïve trust in an overly ambitious plan for peace and development.

## **FOREIGN POLICY CAN, AND MUST, PROVIDE LEADERSHIP**

Diplomats, practitioners and academics working in the realm of foreign policy can help determine which of these two scenarios plays out.

Even though agreeing on the SDGs was a huge achievement, ensuring the process continues is a task for concerted multilateral action. It is a highly ambitious agenda, one that can change the face of the world, and it follows that its implementation needs to be as ambitious – and maybe as unconventional – as the agenda itself. It requires people who can work across geographical, linguistic and cultural boundaries: In other words, foreign policy professionals.



More than ever the SDGs need bold leadership to bridge the divide between current realities and sustainable, just visions of the future.

There are many inherently international targets in the 2030 Agenda, such as 10.6 and 16.8 (global governance), 13 (climate change), 16.4 (illicit finance, arms) and various targets on trafficking (5.2, 8.7, 15.7, 16.2). But even national targets can be supported by the international community, if national action alone is insufficient as is the case with regulation of trade in minerals used to finance insurgents, environmental damage, child labour and many other transboundary issues.

Leadership is the ability to translate vision into reality. More than ever the SDGs need bold leadership to bridge the divide between the world as we find it and the world as we would want to find it. Foreign policy professionals could help by:

1. **Reframing and underlining the SDGs as being in the enlightened self-interest of countries around the world;**
2. **Working to implement the goals in the most fragile and conflict-affected places;**
3. **Addressing the political economy of the implementation of the SDGs; and,**
4. **Bringing in more foreign policy instruments to help implement the SDGs.**

The final section of this essay explores each of these ideas in turn.

## **1 SDGs as enlightened self interest**

Sustainable development is a prime example of an issue where the enlightened self-interest of nations requires global cooperation. Foreign policy practitioners can present a powerful case for the SDGs being a necessary investment in crisis prevention – a cost-effective form of ‘planetary health insurance’. Foreign policy practitioners can help to reframe the debate around the SDGs away from the old clichés around development and the transfer of foreign aid and instead articulate what a transformative change towards a more sustainable world would look like.

In this age of increasing political polarisation, multilateral cooperation (often dubbed ‘globalism’ by its critics) is under fire by those worried about the perceived weakening of national sovereignty, the homogenisation of cultural identity and the rise of globalised unaccountable ‘elites’. In this discourse there is a risk that the SDGs will be seen, and rejected, as emblematic of a partisan political agenda. Historically however, governments on both the left and right of the political spectrum have realised that working together with others, rather than in isolation, is the only real way to deal with shared problems.

***Foreign policy experts can articulate a compelling and credible case for action on the SDGs.***

Multilateralism is just the recognition that common problems are often best solved by collective action – but the benefits of that action accrue to every country. There is a tendency for the pro-SDG crowd (mostly comprised of staff working for the UN and international and national NGOs) to travel in relatively small circles, speaking only to those already convinced of the need for action and glossing over some of the reasons that the goals are not being implemented.

Achieving the SDGs requires reaching beyond this small constituency and convincing a wider group of people to act. What is needed is a constituency in favour of the SDGs that includes citizens, governments, faith groups, the private sector, non-governmental organisations, social movements and academia (see essay #6 on the role of the private sector). Diplomats can play an important role in mobilising that constituency and helping people recognise that their common interests lie in cooperation.

One step in this direction is to highlight the tangible benefits of cooperation. Who delivers the message is important. Foreign policy practitioners already work on the frontlines of many of the world's problems. They can articulate a powerful argument for why the SDGs are necessary. Ultimately this can help move the discussion away from the idea that the SDGs are somehow a partisan, left-wing, liberal agenda. Foreign policy can create a convincing narrative about the need for action.

## 2 Understanding and addressing the political economy of the SDGs

Meanwhile, it is important to recognise that the implementation of an agenda such as the SDGs promises to reshape the world. This has potentially far-reaching effects on domestic, regional and global politics. Not all of these will necessarily be universally positive for all stakeholders. The implementation of the SDGs could, occasionally, have unintended consequences that foreign policy may need to address (see essay #4 on the trade-offs in SDG implementation).

***Foreign policy can provide the necessary information and innovation to minimise the negative impacts and maximise the opportunities of SDG implementation.***

For example, a major transition to cleaner forms of energy production and use will likely increase demand for minerals such as lithium and tantalum, which might increase the likelihood of conflict or significant environmental degradation in countries that produce those minerals. All these complex interactions mean it is important to understand the political

economy of the SDGs. Foreign policy can play an important role in understanding how these forces could affect local and regional politics. Ultimately, foreign policy can provide the necessary information and innovative approaches that can help to ensure that negative impacts are minimised and new opportunities are maximised.



Progress on the SDGs, particularly in countries that emerge from crisis and conflict, is required to reinstate livelihoods, and eventually, strengthen resilience.

### 3 Ensuring the SDGs deliver change in fragile and conflict-affected states

Foreign policy practitioners have a particularly important role to play in helping implement the SDGs in fragile and conflict-affected states (see essay #2 on reducing violence and essay #5 on investing in fragile contexts). These are the countries where progress on the SDGs is already lagging. Foreign policy can work to ensure that fragile and conflict-affected countries fully participate in SDG-related processes. Foreign policy professionals can also help to work out what sort of interventions might be most effective in fragile and conflict-affected states, and ensure that they are implemented in a conflict-sensitive and risk-informed way. Finally, they can help to facilitate and foster the sort of transboundary and regional cooperative frameworks that can support action on the SDGs.

For example, in Mali environmental challenges such as droughts and desertification are making peace harder to attain, and fragility is having regional spill-over effects. Here, foreign policy can contribute by supporting policymakers in developing national security strategies and migration policies to address some of the underlying natural resource related risks.

#### 4 Using the full range of foreign policy instruments to deliver on the SDGs

Success in foreign policy, as in any endeavour, requires the right tools for the job. Foreign policy has a number of tools at its disposal that could help to promote the SDGs and facilitate their implementation. Foreign policy professionals can use a range of existing platforms to promote the SDGs – including the G7, G20, EU Committees, OECD, Bretton Woods institutions. Ultimately, this could help ensure that the SDGs become more than one additional item in the in-tray of development ministers, but rather something that is part of the discussion across all parts of government. This is also necessary at sub-national levels, given that cities and local governments are likely to become significant players in the 2030 sustainable development agenda.

***Many tools in foreign policy already exist to promote the SDGs, at the international, national and sub-national levels.***

But foreign policy can also ensure that the SDGs are woven, wherever possible and appropriate, into the very fabric of trade agreements, mediation processes, cultural relations, customs unions, security pacts, political dialogues and negotiations over the mandates of international organisations. France, for example, announced in late 2018 that it would not support the signature of trade agreements with countries not adhering to the Paris Agreement on climate change. The EU itself has noted that it cannot meet its pledge to deliver on the SDGs and help fight poverty, climate change and environmental degradation globally, if its key trading partners forgo them. The same is true across the entire sweep of the SDGs, and bold leadership from foreign policy is necessary to ensure that the SDGs, and the member states who signed up to them, live up to their promise.

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## II. BEYOND 16: THE SDGS AND THE OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD A MORE PEACEFUL WORLD

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The foreign policy community faces a choice. It can continue to allow unacceptable levels of violence and conflict to undermine individual countries and the global order. Or it can build a new consensus that violence is a preventable epidemic. This would take seriously a growing body of evidence showing what is most likely to work to steer the world back toward global peace, resilient societies, and more sustainable prosperity.

### INCREASED VIOLENCE REQUIRES AN INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

As we prepare to enter the 2020s, the world faces growing threats to peace and security. The “long crisis” of globalisation continues to generate new demographic, economic, and environmental risks that are increasingly converging, putting unprecedented stress on societies and states.<sup>1</sup> Relationships between major powers have deteriorated. Structures for international cooperation are being hollowed out. Domestically, most governments face a wave of distrust from their citizens, with populist forces increasingly organised across national borders.

Violence and violent conflicts are symptoms of this malaise. In the *Pathways for Peace* report, the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the President of the

***The maintenance of international peace and security is the primary mission for the international system.***

World Bank warned of a “dramatic resurgence” of conflict that has caused immense human suffering and led to significant damage to the global order.<sup>2</sup> Organised criminal violence is undermining democracies.<sup>3</sup> Government abuses of human

rights, often themselves an ill-conceived reaction to violence, fuel further grievances, while interpersonal violence, especially against women and children, has emerged as a growing cause of public anger.



Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed (right) with Alison Smale, Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications, at the SDG Media Zone.

The maintenance of international peace and security is the primary mission for the international system.<sup>4</sup> Given the interconnections between different forms of violence and conflict, effective prevention is only possible if it spans the spectrum of conflict and non-conflict violence. And given the ease with which risks proliferate across borders, a renewed commitment to collective action offers the only path to greater resilience.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognises that “there can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development.”<sup>5</sup> For the first time, all countries have agreed to “significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere.” Much of the responsibility for promoting implementation of this target rests with Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) and with the international and regional institutions they support.

The foreign policy can continue to allow unacceptable levels of violence and conflict to undermine individual countries and the global order. Or it can build a new consensus that violence is a preventable epidemic, taking seriously a growing body of evidence showing what is most likely to work to steer the world back toward global peace, resilient societies, and more sustainable prosperity.

## WHY VIOLENCE MATTERS

The end of the Cold War delivered a substantial peace dividend. In 2011, the World Development Report (WDR) hailed the world's emergence from an era marked by "devastating global wars, colonial struggles, and ideological conflicts."<sup>6</sup> Wars between states had become rare. Both the number and intensity of civil wars had decreased after peaking in the early 1990s, while homicide rates were also falling in most regions.

But there was bad news too. The 2011 WDR argued that insecurity had become a leading threat to development, as countries affected by high levels of conflict or non-conflict violence lagged those that were more peaceful. Many countries were locked into cycles of violence that threatened their futures and those of their neighbors. Growing threats – such as organised criminal violence and the illicit flows of people, drugs, and weapons – could only be confronted successfully if the international system was "refitted" to address the risks of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In 2018, the *Pathways for Peace* study was published.<sup>7</sup> It built on much of its predecessor's analysis, but within the context of intensifying threats. Among these

***Violent conflicts have become more complex and protracted, involving more non-state groups and regional and international actors. And they are increasingly linked to global challenges such as climate change, natural disasters, cyber security, and trans-national organised crime. It is projected that by 2030 more than half of the people living in poverty will be found in countries affected by high levels of violence.***

threats is the continued spread of violent extremism in the years after 9/11, exploiting the potential offered by modern communication technologies and by the vulnerabilities of global systems. The Arab Spring, which began as a challenge to states which failed to address grievances concerning dignity and survival of their citizens, triggered a wave of conflicts with regional and global dimensions. And rapid social and economic change across many African countries has threatened to destabilise those with weak institutions and limited state legitimacy.

Conflict increases women's exposure to other forms of violence,<sup>8</sup> while gender-based violence is another early-warning signal.<sup>9</sup> Children face large-scale abductions, recruitment into armed groups, sexual violence, and other forms of abuse.<sup>10</sup> Individual exposure to violence has lifelong effects, including a greater risk of repeat victimisation and of becoming a perpetrator of violence. For societies, conflict "paves the way for higher tolerance of interpersonal violence,<sup>11</sup> increased weapons and drug trade, and political corruption."<sup>12</sup>

But we must also look beyond conflict. More than half of the world's 20 most violent countries are unaffected by a civil or interstate war and 82 per cent of violent deaths occur outside of conflict.<sup>13</sup> Levels of criminal violence in some cities, mostly



In Caracas, Venezuela, the police block the pace of a demonstration.

in Latin America, are as high as in many war zones. Beyond the human impact, this poses political challenges. Gangs displace governments and offer a form of security and justice to the communities they control.<sup>14</sup> The resulting violence is contagious in three ways. Most immediately, it “follows an epidemic-like process of social contagion” as it spreads through social networks.<sup>15</sup> More broadly, it undermines a society’s resilience, as institutions and politicians are corrupted and implicated.<sup>16</sup> And over the longer-term, cycles of violence are perpetuated, as children are raised to believe that violence is normal or inevitable.

If current trends continue, violence is likely to further intensify. Drawing on its lethal violence database, the Small Arms Survey has presented a business-as-usual survey that projects violent deaths to increase by 10 per cent from current levels by 2030.<sup>17</sup> A more negative scenario is also possible, driven by “new armed conflicts or the intensification of existing ones, serious shortages of food or water on a regional scale, mass displacement or migration, or globally strengthened organised crime.”<sup>18</sup> This convergence of threats would see lethal violence grow by almost 50 per cent by 2030, with the world losing control over violence in a way that would be certain to block or reverse progress on key social, economic, and environmental indicators.

In either scenario, firefighting violence will continue to soak up a growing proportion of the resources available to the international system. The humanitarian system is already under untenable levels of stress, with demand increasing by a factor of almost five over the past decade.<sup>19</sup> Peacekeeping operations are also under strain, with a recent high-level panel reporting “a widely shared concern that changes in conflict may be outpacing the ability of UN Peace Operations to respond.”<sup>20</sup>

## VIOLENCE IS A GROWING THREAT TO ALL COUNTRIES

If levels of global violence remain at current levels or increase, we can expect to see a growing entanglement between different forms of violence, with conflict, violent extremism, and criminal violence reinforcing and feeding each other.<sup>21</sup> This will have negative impacts at both national and international levels.

We can already observe that poverty is increasingly concentrated in those countries that are trapped in cycles of conflict and fragility.<sup>22</sup> If current trends continue, these geographies of fragility will grow and continue to offer space for non-state actors, including organised crime and conflict opportunists, to leverage individual grievances towards their own ends. Insecurity continues to fuel spirals away from democratic norms, allowing for policies that put constraints on freedom of expression and association, while increasing reliance on incarceration and surveillance.<sup>23</sup> Many of these countries will not often make headlines, making them unlikely to receive the support and resources they need to break out of the fragility trap. Others will export enough disorder across their borders to pose a regional or global threat.

***No country or region can be confident that it will remain unaffected by these trends. Violence is increasingly globalised, as are the illicit flows that accompany it.***

It would be a mistake, though, to see violence purely as a problem for the poorest countries. In recent years, populist leaders and movements have become increasingly effective at channeling narratives of insecurity and exclusion to bolster support. Violence – alongside the corruption with which it interacts – has reshaped the politics of a growing number of otherwise resilient middle or high-income countries such as Brazil, Hungary, and the United States. Even when violence levels are in decline, as is true in the United States, populist leaders have been effective at leveraging the fear of violence to enact policies which reinforce their aims.

Counter-productive responses to this violence can then further undermine institutions and fuel additional grievances. *Mano Dura* (“Firm Hand”) or tough-on-crime approaches are popular with both politicians and the public, but they have proved largely ineffective, while undermining democratic norms and often providing new opportunities for violent non-state actors to compete with the state.<sup>24</sup>

No country or region can be confident that it will remain unaffected by these trends. As Robert Cooper argued, “We may not be interested in chaos, but chaos is interested in us.”<sup>25</sup> Violence is increasingly globalised, as are the illicit financial and resource flows that accompany it. Neighboring regions now have a shared demographic destiny – Africa and Europe, Latin and North America – which is heavily influenced by patterns of violence and political instability. In some cases, the involvement of proxy actors, as seen in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, reduces political space for

constructive engagement and has broader impacts on the functioning of multilateral systems. The fear of violence will also shape international engagement by limiting response options, as already exemplified around terrorism and migration policies. Malicious actors will also enjoy opportunities to manipulate both elite and public opinion, framing foreign policy responses in ways that fuel further grievances.

The internationalisation of violence is a foreign policy challenge with development dimensions, not the other way around. High levels of violence stress international systems and cooperation at a time when they are most urgently needed. The world has undoubtedly lost capacity to respond to conflict and non-conflict shocks in recent years. Populism is undermining the “future-oriented” behaviors needed to support collective action, leading to a failure to invest in the hardware and software of international cooperation. It is unlikely that the international system has the political resilience needed for crisis management during the financial crisis that began in 2008, for example. A further wave of rapid political change – akin to the Arab Spring – would stretch global capacity to respond and could lead to significant friction between major powers. The foreign policy community – or at least those parts of it still committed to a rules-based global order – urgently needs to find a new platform to strengthen the capacity for international collective action.

***The internationalisation of violence is a foreign policy challenge with development dimensions, not the other way around.***

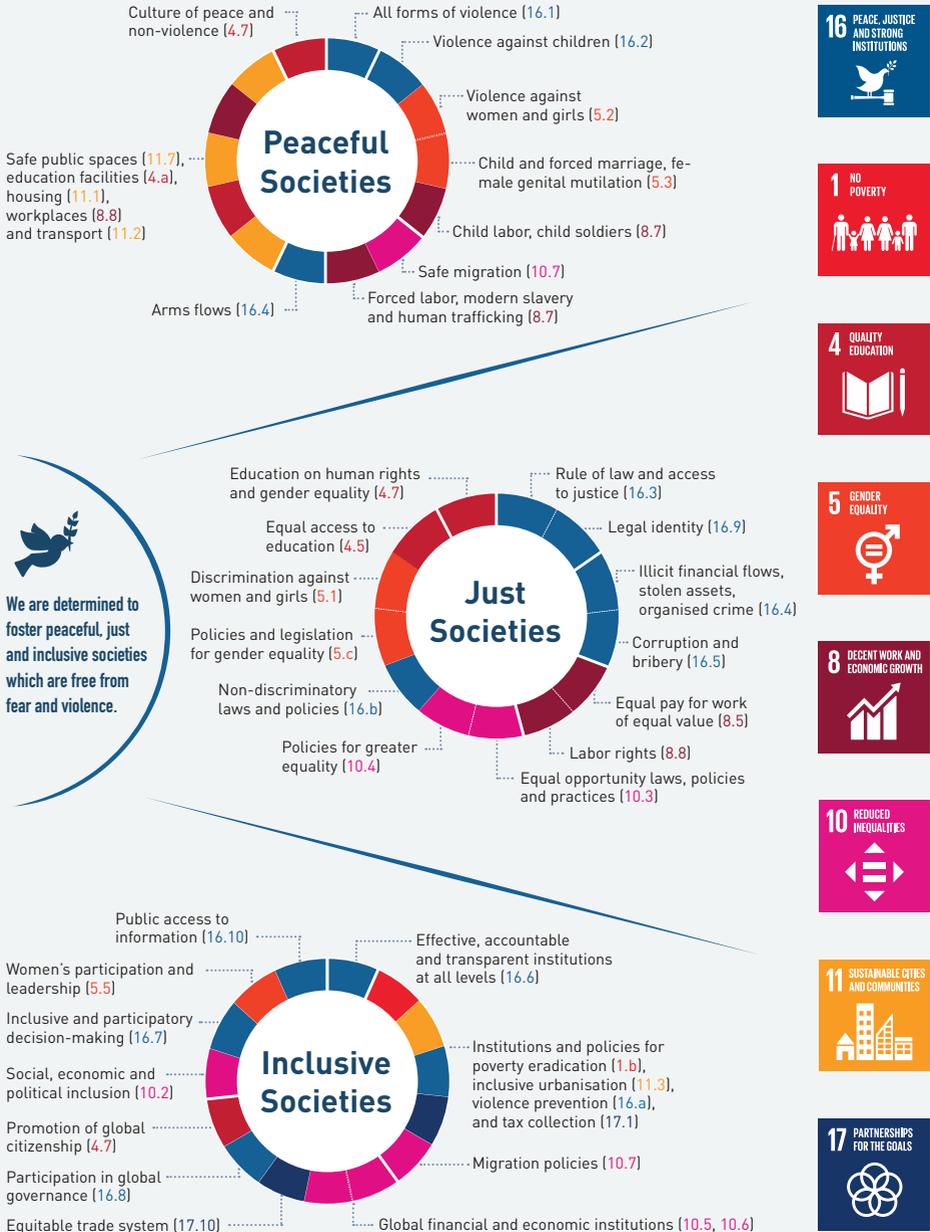
## THE SDGS AS A PLATFORM FOR FOREIGN POLICY

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides an action plan of “unprecedented scope of significance... accepted by all countries and applicable to all.”<sup>26</sup> The SDGs correct the most important failing of their predecessor – the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – by including ambitious targets for building “peaceful, just and inclusive societies which are free from fear and violence.”

While SDG16 is the main goal for peace, justice, and inclusion, the agenda’s negotiators included targets related to these aspirations in other goals as well. In all 36 targets from eight SDGs directly measure an aspect of peace, justice, or inclusion. The framing of “SDG16+” (see Figure 1) brings together targets for reducing various forms of violence with those for strengthening access to justice and the rule of law, transforming standards of governance, and promoting social, economic, and political inclusion. The 2030 Agenda is universal in nature, providing a basis for cooperation between countries from all regions and income groups. But it also promises to “reach the furthest behind first,” encouraging greater efforts to support countries and communities whose path to sustainable development is currently blocked by violence, insecurity, and injustice.<sup>27</sup>

Figure 1

THE SDG16+ FRAMEWORK



Source: Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies 2017: The Roadmap for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies – A Call to Action to Change our World. New York: Center on International Cooperation.

Global Goals have little impact on their own. They only prove influential if they provide a focus for increasing political will, mobilising partnerships, strengthening strategies that are based on evidence of what works, and securing the finance needed for effective implementation. But this is exactly what the foreign policy community requires if it is to shape an ambitious agenda for tackling violence. It is precisely the commitments contained within the MDGs, for example, that coalesced actors around extreme poverty, forcing them to think in a more integrated manner about what strategies were needed to reach the poorest people.

SDG16+ is beginning to stimulate this kind of cooperation for peace and security, not through formal structures alone, but through the hard work of building coalitions to address the most important risks to peace.

The Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies was formed by a group of member states, international organisations, global partnerships, and civil society networks. At the UN General Assembly in September 2017, the group published the Roadmap for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies as a “first guide” for those working to implement SDG16+. Other “umbrella” partnerships for SDG16+ include the Global Alliance for Reporting Progress on Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, which assists member states in tracking progress, and the 16+ Forum, which runs an annual showcase to “demonstrate SDG16+ in action.”<sup>28</sup>

***SDG16+ is beginning to stimulate cooperation for peace and security, not through formal structures alone, but through the hard work of building coalitions to address the most important risks to peace.***

Partners have also mobilised around individual SDG16+ targets or clusters of related targets.<sup>29</sup> Some examples include:

- The Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children and the Spotlight Initiative to eliminate violence against women and girls. Alliance 8.7 is working to end child labor and modern slavery.
- The Task Force on Justice, which has brought together member states and a growing group of international partners to accelerate implementation of SDG16.3 (access to justice for all).
- The Open Government Partnership. Although formed before the agreement of the 2030 Agenda, its national action plans are increasingly seen as an opportunity “to promote transparent and accountable implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.”

These examples demonstrate how new and collaborative partnerships can build off formal structures to heighten attention, increase knowledge, and leverage resources.

In 2019, the High-level Political Forum will review SDGs for the first time at ministerial level, under the theme “Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality.”<sup>30</sup> Heads of State and Government will also gather for the first SDG Summit, marking the end of the first cycle of the 2030 Agenda. They are asked to “mobilise further actions to accelerate implementation” of all 17 SDGs. These events will provide a focus for increased commitments to the implementation of the SDG targets for peace, justice, and inclusion. They are also an opportunity for ministries of foreign affairs to mainstream the SDG16+ targets into their influencing strategies.

## TOWARDS ACHIEVING SDG16.1

SDG16.1 makes a commitment to “significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere.”<sup>31</sup>

While targets for specific forms of violence have received considerable attention (against women and children, in particular), this “headline” target for violence prevention has considerable untapped potential. In the MDG era, “halving poverty” encouraged actors from multiple sectors to develop integrated strategies to reach the poorest people. Similarly, SDG16.1 asks the foreign policy community to explore what it would take to achieve sustained reductions in violence. By asking, “What would it take to halve global violence in a generation?” foreign policy actors can begin to galvanise the partnerships that are needed to make a more ambitious approach to prevention possible.

SDG16.1 can be used to bring together communities working on five inter-related forms of prevention:

- **Conflict prevention**, drawing on the Pathways for Peace framework and the joint Sustaining Peace resolutions of the General Assembly and the Security Council. This is also an opportunity to take forward the Secretary-General’s disarmament agenda, in particular his call for a “new focus on disarmament that saves lives” as conflict becomes “more deadly, destructive and complex.”<sup>32</sup>
- The prevention of **organised and criminal violence**, especially in urban areas. In this area, there is growing evidence of what works to reduce violence in the most heavily-affected communities.<sup>33</sup>

- The prevention of **interpersonal violence**, especially against women and children. There is also a strong evidence base in this area, and growing efforts to “package” it for policymakers, for example through the internationally-endorsed INSPIRE strategies for ending violence against children.<sup>34</sup>
- The prevention of **human rights abuses and mass atrocities**, where the newly-appointed High Commissioner for Human Rights has described “every step towards implementation of the human rights agenda [as] an act of prevention, strengthening the bonds between communities and reinforcing inclusive development and peace.”
- The prevention of **violent extremism**, where the UN’s plan of action has proposed that each country should develop a multi-disciplinary approach that fortifies the social contract and that is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>35</sup>

*By asking, “What would it take to halve global violence in a generation?” foreign policy actors can begin to galvanise the partnerships that are needed to make a more ambitious approach to prevention possible.*



A man waiting by the cars going through a checkpoint in Ramallah, Palestinian Territories.



Solutions also tend to be cross-cutting, requiring a commitment to evidence-based strategies that increase the capacity of security and justice institutions to manage disputes peacefully; a strengthened role for other sectors such as health, education, and social protection; a commitment to including communities and addressing their grievances; and a willingness to promote human rights and gender equality.<sup>36</sup> These prevention activities should be aligned with more short-term stabilisation efforts and long-term and broader resilience building which addresses the root causes of violence and conflict. While these communities tend to work in silos, different forms of violence and conflict are heavily inter-related. Joint risk analysis will bring political, development, and security actors together, as they “think together to act together.”<sup>37</sup>

## **THE ROLE OF MINISTRIES OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS IN REDUCING VIOLENCE**

A global objective to halve poverty was first proposed in the World Development Report in 1990.<sup>38</sup> It was promoted throughout the 1990s by the World Bank and other international organisations, and by the Development Ministers from Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and the UK, who formed the Utstein Group.<sup>39</sup>

Leadership from Ministers and Ministries of Foreign Affairs will be similarly important if SDG16.1 is to emerge as a central objective for the 2030 Agenda. International actors are already involved. The UN Secretary-General has identified prevention as a central priority for his time in office and the Pathways for Peace report has created a foundation for unprecedented cooperation between the UN and World Bank. The global public health community has increasingly focused on violence, with the World Health Assembly passing a resolution in 2014 on the role of health systems in reducing violence.<sup>40</sup> The World Health Organisation will publish the second Global Status Report on Violence Prevention in 2019, providing an update on what governments across the world are doing to prevent violence.<sup>41</sup> International organisations have supported new partnerships and campaigns on violence against women and children.

At a regional level, the Instinto de Vida campaign aims to reduce homicides in Latin America by 50 per cent.<sup>42</sup> The African Union has made a commitment to “silencing the guns” with the aim of ending wars, gender-based violence, and genocide in the region.<sup>43</sup> There are strong campaigns in these areas, such as #SafetoLearn (which aims to end violence in schools), the #MeToo movement (gender-based violence), or the newly-formed Global Peacebuilding Coalition. Cities are also important actors, given the burden of violence in some urban areas and the risks of further violence as Africa and parts of Asia urbanise at an unprecedented rate.<sup>44</sup> New partnerships, moreover, such as the Global Network on Safer Cities, are beginning to provide a greater voice for the world’s mayors.

***Ministries of Foreign Affairs are integrators who see the bigger picture and have a mandate to work across sectors through their international, regional, and bilateral cooperation.***

But political leadership is urgently needed. Ministries of Foreign Affairs are integrators. They see the bigger picture and have a mandate to work across sectors through their international, regional, and bilateral cooperation, managing the global risks that their citizens face.<sup>45</sup> At home, the 2030 Agenda challenges them to provide a platform for national line ministries to engage in collective action to deliver on the SDGs. By making SDG16.1 central to foreign policy, ministries can build a movement to address converging risks, integrating prevention approaches across different forms of violence. They can do so in a way that prioritises tackling universal and long-term challenges, such as addressing gender norms which tolerate high levels of violence, while simultaneously tackling the most immediate opportunities to reduce violence; by supporting prevention in the world’s most violent cities; or by developing new models for engaging with countries as they emerge from conflict.

Richer countries should support national actors in advancing effective violence prevention, particularly in conflict-affected states and other states with high risks but limited capacity. Engaging the voice and leadership of countries suffering the worst forms of violence will be critical, but it is important not to overwhelm countries with multiple overlapping agendas. Instead they should be approached with a coherent strategy that focuses on synergies and mutual benefits. Foreign policy-makers can also use SDG16.1 to focus renewed attention on the external stresses that increase the risks of violence, in areas such as illicit financial and arms flows and transnational crime (SDG16.4), or the globalisation of corruption (SDG16.5). They are also in a unique position to ensure that other risk multipliers are taken into account, highlighting the links between violence and insecurity and geopolitical factors, such as climate change, the clean energy transition, and the governance of natural resources and land.

## WHAT MINISTRIES OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS MUST DO

If SDG16.1 is to inspire increased commitments to achieve quantified reductions in violence, foreign policymakers will need to:

- Increase **political will** by winning the argument that violence is a preventable epidemic. In order to combat the fatalism that inhibits action, this will require raising awareness of the evidence that shows that rapid reductions in violence are possible with the right strategies and investment.
- Build the consensus needed to accelerate implementation of evidence-based **strategies** and to reduce reliance on approaches that are politically expedient but which often worsen violence and undermine the legitimacy of institutions and governments.
- Strengthen **partnerships**, both by supporting formal multi-stakeholder platforms and, more importantly, by building bridges between actors from different sectors. A priority is to create more space for partners who can drive ambition and innovation, while protecting human rights defenders, humanitarian actors, the media, and others who are under threat.
- Promote **investment** in prevention, based on the business case for conflict prevention from the *Pathways for Peace* report and business cases for preventing other forms of violence, and develop new financing mechanisms that address violence and insecurity in a holistic manner.

Making a success of SDG16.1 – and linking it to the rest of SDG16+ and to the 2030 Agenda as a whole – requires dynamic and outward-looking diplomacy. These are challenges that cannot be solved unilaterally or solely through technical approaches but require integrated and coordinated action across levels, actors and thematic silos. Quantified targets for reducing violence have opened a window for a new dialogue to which all countries can bring their challenges and potential solutions. This could create national ownership and leadership for prevention that goes far beyond the usual suspects. Ministries of Foreign Affairs will need to use the full range of multilateral tools at their disposal, working through the UN system, but also the G20 and regional forums.

***Making a success of SDG16.1 – and linking it to the rest of SDG16+ and to the 2030 Agenda as a whole – requires dynamic and outward-looking diplomacy.***

Most of all, they will need to generate a new vision and greater ambition. Collective action *could* halve global violence.<sup>46</sup> But, to our cost, we haven't yet tried.

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### III. BEWARE THE POLITICS: LEVERAGING FOREIGN POLICY FOR SDG IMPLEMENTATION

BY DARIA IVLEVA (ADELPHI), ALEXANDER MÜLLER (TMG THINK TANK FOR SUSTAINABILITY) AND BENJAMIN POHL (ADELPHI)

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2015 marked a high point for international multilateral cooperation. With its 17 goals and 169 targets, the implementation process for the SDGs may appear an essentially technocratic exercise. Yet in view of the social transformation that it seeks to bring about across key dimensions of human civilisation, SDG implementation remains a profoundly political process. Because of the intense political implications, in-depth analysis, political foresight and strategic guidance are needed. As the consequences of SDG implementation cross and transcend borders and impact international relations, foreign policy has a critical role to play.

The endorsement of the Agenda 2030 in September 2015 after long and complex negotiations was an important success of the multilateral system. Whereas the UN is regularly accused of a lack of efficiency and effectiveness, all of its 193 member states adopted 17 interlinked Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the UN General Assembly in New York – a clear indication of the international community's will to agree on an ambitious new global consensus. Moreover, this consensus was reached through the established processes within the multilateral system.

With its 169 targets, the implementation process for the SDGs may appear to be a largely technical exercise. To an extent, it is. But it is also far more. In view of the social transformation that it seeks to bring about across key dimensions of human civilisation, it is also a profoundly political process. This should be obvious from a first glance at the individual goals: whether it is ending hunger and extreme poverty, shifting towards sustainable production and consumption, reducing inequality, or ensconcing peace and justice, these objectives embody the standard definition of politics – a competition over who gets what, when and how. Resolving these questions cannot plausibly be left to technical experts on their own.

## BEWARE THE POLITICS

The SDGs are profoundly political. Yet the politics do not stop with the selection of goals and attendant targets. Global-level endorsement of lofty objectives does not imply automatic implementation (see also essay #1). Governments may not be particularly interested in pushing for their realisation. In extreme cases, they may even pursue politics that actively undermine them, e.g. by using hunger as a political weapon against parts of society or neighbouring countries. A majority of governments is probably willing and interested in achieving progress on the SDGs, but faces not just trade-offs and limitations in capacity, but also societal constraints in addressing the structural inequities that underlie poverty, discrimination and lack of environmental sustainability. In a world of constrained resources, few governments will be able and willing to pay a high price for attaining all global goals. Rather, most will focus on those that align with their own political agenda.

***The SDGs are aiming to overcome the status quo. Therefore, implementation might have an impact also on the geopolitical status quo. Political attention, analysis and guidance have to accompany the transformation.***

As a consequence of these constraints and incentives, the patterns of SDG implementation will very much follow national and governmental interests. This not only concerns which (if any) SDGs and targets are prioritised, but also through which specific measures

and policies they are pursued. Moreover, there are many synergies, but also trade-offs between individual SDGs and targets. As essay #4 of this series illustrates, implementing one SDG can reverse development gains in other SDG targets, redistributing costs and benefits with new winners and losers.

These complexities at the national level have transnational and international implications. Two consequences stand out. First, any envisaged transformation in an individual country will be impacted by geopolitical trends such as shifts in resource availability and demand and shifting balances of power. Second, the effects of transformations will reverberate internationally, potentially shifting resource demands, trade routes and investments. Implementing the 2030 Agenda will bring about major shifts in economic structures in countries around the world and, as a consequence, impact their international relations, positions of power and interdependencies.



In 2013, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) holds a thematic discussion on its contribution to the elaboration of the post-2015 development agenda.

The envisaged transformation is not only an opportunity for many societies to improve their welfare across social, economic and environmental dimensions, but can also provide significant peace dividends. However, change also implies risks, and system change implies system risks. The SDGs are aiming to overcome the *status quo*, but without proactive transition governance, this development could undermine geopolitical stability. Consequently, it needs political attention, analysis and guidance. Providing politically informed monitoring and guidance at the interface between the national and international domains is one of the key traditional functions of diplomacy, as is its responsibility for maintaining and extending the zone of peace and stability. Hence, diplomacy needs to seriously analyse and engage with the SDGs.

In order to underpin this argument, the next sections analyse three examples on food, water and energy that connect to many individual SDGs as well as illustrate the political dimensions and interdependencies that underlie SDG implementation. The subsequent section seeks to tease out how foreign policy-makers can help to manage risks and trade-offs, enhance synergies, and overcome political barriers related to global SDG implementation processes through strengthening foresight and guidance.

### Food, agriculture and ecosystems

Our first example looks at efforts to improve food security (SDG 2). Whereas few would question the moral imperative of ending hunger and malnutrition, unidimensional efforts can produce negative (geo)political impacts.

The objective of reducing hunger has historically been sought via increased agricultural production and lower prices for food. In low-income, resource-poor countries, agricultural productivity growth can be a powerful lever to reduce poverty levels, meaning that investing in agriculture can have a significant development impact.<sup>1</sup> In Africa, where about 60 per cent of the population and a majority of the poor live in rural areas and where agriculture employs 60 per cent of the labour force,<sup>2,3</sup> between 30 and 80 cents of additional income are generated for every extra dollar of agricultural income.<sup>4</sup>

However, whereas greater production capacity and lower costs have benefits, they also carry a price. Current industrial food production patterns put unsustainable pressure on natural resources including water, soil and biodiversity and have an enormous negative climate impact.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, lower agricultural prices often undermine the livelihoods of smallholders who are essential for global food security. In Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, smallholders produce 80 per cent of the food consumed.<sup>6</sup> Globally, very small farms under 2ha produce 30–34 per cent of food supply on 24 per cent of gross agricultural area, i.e. they are more efficient in terms of using limited land resources.<sup>7</sup>

From a foreign policy perspective, there are hence clear incentives for taking smallholders' interests as well as the natural resource base into account. An emphasis merely on increasing productivity per worker

***From a foreign policy perspective, there are clear incentives for taking smallholders' interests as well as the natural resource base into account.***

or unit of land without taking social stability into account will likely enhance, above all, the profits of landowners or multinational companies who provide agricultural inputs. Incentives for cash crops can undermine national food security (if and when global markets stall, as they are periodically wont to), endanger rural employment and thereby increase pressures for speedy urbanisation and migration, and add to resource pressures through increased land use and water abstraction for water-intensive crops. All three developments can fuel socio-political tensions and contribute to increased migration, primarily internally but potentially also across borders.

Comprehensive sustainable development solutions are available, ranging from landscape restoration<sup>8,9,10</sup> to climate-smart and smallholder-centred agriculture. These are often already on the agenda of development cooperation. However, a



Current industrial food production patterns put unsustainable pressure on natural resources including water, soil and biodiversity and have an enormous climate impact. They also endanger smallholder farming.

transformation to sustainable agriculture that serves the SDGs at scale is a much broader process with a multitude of political barriers. Improving productivity and market access for small-scale farmers interacts with international food trade dynamics and the complex international political economy of food, land and agricultural inputs. Agricultural models that improve human security face the vested interest of political elites, international corporations and financial market incentives. Shifting incentives to make them more compatible with and supportive of the SDGs requires political attention that follows an enlightened and international understanding of the public good – i.e. the shared interest in smallholder-supporting, food security-enhancing, conflict-sensitive and sustainability-promoting patterns of agricultural production – rather than the domestic producer interests that, all too often, win out due to the relative strength of their interests.

Foreign policy can and needs to help overcome these political barriers by publicly emphasising and explaining that a functioning and fair international food system is a matter of global public interest, by facilitating inclusive, transparent dialogue processes that pay greater attention to environmental and distributional implications, and by insisting on fairness and sustainability in domestic policy-shaping. The opportunities and benefits of socially and environmentally sustainable resource management need to gain visibility across the different sectors that impact food security at home and abroad – from trade and investment to development cooperation and crisis prevention and management. This diplomatic responsibility extends not only to international negotiations, but also to the domestic debates informing national preference formation.

### Transboundary waters

The second example focuses on water (SDG 6), and transboundary water in particular. It illustrates how foreign policy can play a role in overcoming zero-sum mentalities and boost SDG implementation by leveraging and harnessing benefits across several sectors.

Transboundary water cooperation offers significant opportunities across an entire basin. Hydropower dams in upstream countries, for example, can simultaneously help control downstream floods, improve downstream navigation, and increase the potential for downstream hydropower by stabilising water flows – and may also offer downstream countries cheap electricity import options. These benefits are obvious to professional water managers, yet political conditions

***Transboundary water cooperation offers opportunities across an entire basin.***

prevent many basins from realising them. Instead, dam construction in upstream countries often leads to conflict with downstream neighbours. Although such conflicts are unlikely to escalate into international wars, they fuel tensions and hamper economic development as well as sustainable and equitable water use. Conversely, achieving transboundary water cooperation can promote overall cooperation and even offer an entry point for dialogue in otherwise conflictive settings.

Central Asia offers a prominent example of how political factors can make the search for win-win solutions difficult, and how foreign policy can help advance such efforts. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Aral Sea basin has witnessed significant conflict over water. Upstream countries inherited big Soviet reservoirs that had primarily been built to boost downstream irrigation in summer for cotton production. However, as upstream countries' energy costs rose post-independence, they started releasing more water for hydropower generation in winter. Uzbekistan, whose economy has



Accompanied by Uzbek Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev (second from left), Ban Ki-moon, former UN Secretary-General (left), takes in the rusted, abandoned ships of Muynak, Uzbekistan, a former port city whose population has declined precipitously with the rapid recession of the Aral Sea.

traditionally been particularly dependent on irrigation, reacted angrily and vehemently opposed the construction of additional upstream dams, going as far as to threaten military action. The resulting limitations in cooperation cost all Central Asian countries dearly.<sup>11</sup> Yet, a recent change in Uzbekistan's leadership led to a new foreign policy doctrine focusing on regional cooperation, transcending competition over resources and unlocking opportunities for mutually beneficial partnerships.

How did this come about? The new Uzbek president articulated a new foreign policy focusing above all on good relations with Central Asian countries.<sup>12</sup> Such improved relations were clearly incompatible with strong opposition to upstream countries' plans for dams, given the political capital and prestige that the latter had invested into these plans. The Uzbek administration likely calculated that the risk lay less in the impacts of these dams than in the political tensions. After all, models showed that, if operated in a cooperative setting, Uzbekistan could actually benefit from the Rogun dam.<sup>13</sup> Hence, it took a deliberate political decision to accept the risks of upsetting established narratives and positions.

More generally, transboundary collaboration often depends on the perceived political risks of water cooperation, rather than the lack of economic incentives.<sup>14</sup> Diplomats can and should try to help shape political thinking over national and regional development perspectives with an aim of shifting such perceptions, drawing on their access to political decision-makers and critical stakeholders, their mandate, and their skills of persuasion. For third parties seeking to foster cooperation, this means embracing water management as a foreign policy issue.<sup>15</sup> A broad toolbox – from facilitating private discussions between decision-shapers to reducing risks by offering guarantees or joint assessments – has been developed,<sup>16</sup> but it often needs the political impetus and diplomatic skillset that foreign policy can provide. In Central Asia, several third parties helped prepare the recent progress in water cooperation. The Berlin Process, for example, sought to foster closer water cooperation and build trust over this critical resource, repeatedly bringing Central Asian government officials together and facilitating their agreement on joint declarations.<sup>17</sup>

***Transboundary collaboration often depends on the perceived political risks of water cooperation, rather than the lack of economic incentives. Diplomats can and should try to help shift such perceptions to enable cooperation.***

As developments in Central Asia illustrate, foreign policy can play a critical role in overcoming zero-sum competition over water and enabling beneficial cooperation. However, realising this potential for water diplomacy needs more constructive political engagement that will help embed technical transboundary cooperation into attractive regional development narratives and pathways. Since achieving water security is an essential element of international security, diplomats should embrace water diplomacy and help build the agreements that underpin better water management.

### Energy transition

Our third example, energy transition (SDG 7), shows why SDG implementation needs, and can benefit from, a closer connection between domestic and international politics. At a time when challenges are increasingly global, there is huge potential in seeking to consciously leverage domestic policies for positive spill-over effects that propel the necessary global transformation.

Through the SDGs, all governments embraced the necessity of a global energy revolution. In its absence, neither the energy and climate objectives nor, given the many interlinkages between goals, many of the other SDGs are attainable. While few countries are fully and consistently living up to this ambition, some have been pursuing ambitious goals in shifting towards the use of renewable energies. The German energy transition policies – the *Energiewende* – offer a good example in this regard.

***While the cost-benefit balance of the Energiewende is contested in Germany, its support for renewables arguably played a catalytic role in promoting a global energy revolution for development and climate neutrality.***

While the cost-benefit balance of the *Energiewende* is contested<sup>18</sup> in Germany, its support for renewables arguably played a catalytic role in promoting a global energy revolution. Its direct impact on emissions was blunted by the lack of ambition of the EU emissions trading system and the absence of effective alternative carbon price mechanisms which some other EU member states introduced. Moreover, the subsidies

in Germany were inefficient, according to classical economic theory, insofar as they primarily supported renewable energy installation in less than ideal circumstances: foregoing geographically better placed alternatives as well as the economies of scale that would derive from application beyond national boundaries, and focusing on incremental development of existing technologies rather than incentivising the next generation of technology.<sup>19</sup> That these pioneering policies nonetheless were so successful is a pointer to the potential of transition policies consciously designed to promote global rather than just national decarbonisation.

Several mechanisms enabled the *Energiewende* to play a catalytic role. Demonstrating the viability of such a transition in one of Europe's most industrialised countries with a lot of energy-hungry manufacturing was in itself an important signal. Moreover, the *Energiewende* was accompanied by investment in capacity building, the transfer of technology and exchanging experiences with other countries.<sup>20</sup> Yet, its most important impact derived from the influence it had on the competitiveness of renewable energy deployment.

In recent decades, the costs of renewable energy have plummeted around the globe, consistently and significantly surpassing the projections of the International Energy Agency.<sup>21,22</sup> For instance, the costs of solar photovoltaic (PV) modules in



A different energy future is possible, but it will require a new vision to make a major contribution to development, peace, and security.

2018 were, globally, less than 20 per cent of what they had been in 2009, while the cost of solar PV electricity declined by almost 75 per cent over the last decade.<sup>23</sup> The technological advancement, decreasing capital costs and increasing project experience that made this possible owe a lot to the investment and policy frameworks in countries such as Germany, Spain and Denmark. The combination of decreasing costs and (bilateral) cooperation on overcoming context-specific barriers in terms of capacity, financial or legal requirements then helped other countries develop their energy sector. In Chile, for instance, international support has played an important role in building the knowledge, financial and legal basis that allowed the country to harness the momentum provided by decreasing technology cost. Renewable electricity became competitive in less than a decade, with no government subsidies. Globally, technologies for renewable energy are now available at competitive costs.

***Legal and financial mechanisms supporting the energy transition in Germany had a world-wide impact. Thanks to this “globalisation” of technologies, renewable sources now power sustainable development.***

The remarkable characteristic of this development is the fact that the legal and financial mechanisms supporting the energy transition in Germany had a worldwide impact. Thanks to this “globalisation” of technologies, renewable sources now

power sustainable development. Such spill-overs are not easy to plan for in policy-making, yet it is important to acknowledge how effective these mechanisms can be in advancing progress on sustainable transformation internationally. Early action to trigger cascading international dynamics can emanate from just a small group of countries, as seen in solar, wind, and battery technologies. The results can then ease global cooperation and negotiation processes.

Foreign policy can play a role catalysing this cooperation. Obviously, it cannot do so on its own as diplomats cannot bring about (nor necessarily foresee) technological progress. Yet they can impart on domestic policy-making the importance of taking a global perspective and the global opportunities that arise from such transitions. Promoting the *Energiewende* internationally is good; echoing its global impact back into domestic debates would be even better. Awareness-raising on the positive global impact of the energy transition will also support the necessary next steps in developing high-tech solutions for all.

Beyond the need to inform domestic political debates, diplomats could also help make it more effective. If states agree to share the costs of technology research and development, this not only reduces risks of free-riding, but can harness scale effects and potentially help enhance cooperation on other issues as well. By focusing on shared challenges and shared solutions, jointly transitioning to cheaper and more sustainable renewable energy can showcase the true potential and added value of multilateral approaches. A broad international coalition around a re-powered *Energiewende* can and should become a centrepiece of international cooperation global sustainable development.

## WHAT FOREIGN POLICY NEEDS TO DO

### 1 Provide foresight

Foreign policy needs to understand how SDG implementation is a highly significant piece of the puzzle that is international politics, and that there is a need to think strategically about its implications. Whereas we advocate for active support for the SDGs, we acknowledge it is not certain that SDG progress will necessarily produce positive outcomes only. The logic behind much development cooperation so far has been that the strengthening of societal coherence will lead to more successful state-building in the developing world, resulting in more capable governments that will ultimately use their capacity to respond to the universal needs of societies for greater welfare, equity and sustainability. As states and societies become more alike and saturated, international relations become more harmonious – or so the assumption goes.



Mia Mottley, the Prime Minister of Barbados during a high-level UN panel discussion on financing the 2030 Agenda.

There is, however, also the possibility that reduced internal grievances and stronger, internally more legitimate states could unleash greater interstate competition. China's development over in recent decades, and the fact that China alone accounts for much of the progress on the SDG's predecessors, the Millennium Development Goals, might be a good reason for questioning liberal assumptions about likely socio-political effects of development gains. Yet such doubts about the ultimate results of SDG implementation only reinforce our key message: the need for foreign policy foresight and political guidance in SDG implementation.

**Understand the connections between the goals and governance levels:** As this essay and the entire series make clear, the politics and policies surrounding the SDGs and their implementation are complex. This implies a need for foresight and analysis that is derived from an enlightened, supra-sectoral perspective – one that

does not miss the wood for the trees (see also essay #1). The international community needs a better understanding of the complex multi-level political changes that accompany SDG implementation, including recognition of the pitfalls and opportunities that arise from the interaction between different goals (see also essay #4). Beyond this cross-sectoral understanding, SDG implementation also needs a better appreciation of the connections between the internal and external policy dimensions, e.g. with a view towards understanding and leveraging systemic mechanisms such as international technology spill-overs. Foreign policy practitioners are well-positioned to provide such a perspective.

**Integrate SDGs into geopolitical analysis and foreign policy planning:** Foreign policy strategies, whether for global issues, specific regions or bilateral relations, need to consider the implications of the 2030 Agenda for international politics. In

*Environmental change and natural resource needs are part of the geopolitics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The 2030 Agenda offers a framework to analyse these changes – and ultimately to shape them, too.*

other words, foreign policy planners should ask how a region or institution would develop under different scenarios of SDG implementation and devise their strategies against this backdrop. Integrating the SDG perspective into these strategies will provide a more comprehensive view on what factors shape geopolitics and how its dynamics unfold. Environmental change, natural resource needs, and social, economic and technological mega-trends are part and parcel of the

geopolitics game of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The 2030 Agenda offers a framework to analyse these changes – and ultimately to shape them, too, as our second point emphasises.

## 2 Provide guidance

**Use SDG implementation to strengthen multilateral cooperation:** If the international community is able to create and maintain strong multilateral structures (global, regional, and other coalitions) to support and guide SDG implementation, this will have several benefits. First, it will facilitate harnessing international synergies such as knowledge spill-overs and technology cost reductions, resulting in more efficient solutions than if countries act on their own. Secondly, it will strengthen joint international governance of SDG implementation and help mitigate possible conflict due to power shifts and conflicts of interest emerging in the wake of transformation. Finally, it is likely to strengthen multilateralism as such. The UNFCCC negotiation process, and its involvement of non-governmental actors in particular, can arguably serve as a role model. Foreign policy has a critical role to play in making the multilateral system fit for purpose (see also essay #1). Conversely, the implementation of the Paris Agreement and the SDGs will have a critical impact on the future of the multilateral system.

**Help overcome genuinely political barriers:** Securing synergies and progress across multiple SDGs cannot be left to technical implementation that almost by definition starts from a sectoral perspective. Implementation that accounts for the complexity inherent in the interlinked 17 goals (if not each of them individually) implies a need for political guidance (see also essay #4). Even more importantly, integrated approaches that live up to the challenge of the 2030 Agenda will require deep changes to the status quo. This is bound to result in political barriers and to require difficult negotiations and political investment. Given the international interlinkages, foreign policy has a critical role to play. It can help overcome barriers by leveraging political access and by facilitating the dialogue processes that can negotiate peaceful change.

**Connect domestic debates to international politics:** In order to advance the 2030 Agenda, foreign policy-makers can and should connect domestic and international politics. Domestically, they can contribute their perspectives on domestic policies in the light of international challenges, geopolitical trends and interconnectedness. This can make domestic policies more comprehensive and resilient as well as help to leverage the benefits of domestic transformations for foreign policy and global development objectives.

***In order to advance the 2030 Agenda, foreign policy-makers can and should connect domestic and international politics.***

Foreign policy can also use international developments to seek to inform a consistent framework for domestic action, e.g. through the recurring Agenda 2030 review process. As observers of international trends and risks, foreign policy-makers can and should make sure that developments like decarbonisation or the destabilising regional effects of environmental change are accounted for domestically. This can help support arguments against unsustainable energy or food policies.

Finally, effective domestic policies are needed to increase international credibility and soft power. International efforts at persuasion are more plausible and influence in negotiations greater if domestic politics are clearly aligned with a country's international positions. Embracing an ambition of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius cannot indefinitely be combined with Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) that collectively put us on the road to 3 degrees of global warming. Domestic and international politics are intimately interwoven, and nowhere more so than in the case of the SDGs.

## A PLEA FOR POLITICS AND PRIORITISATION

The implementation of the SDGs is a deeply political process. Therefore, its positive potential cannot be harnessed and possible downsides cannot be attenuated without serious political investment. For foreign policy-makers, we argue, this means strengthening foresight and guidance.

The SDGs offer a comprehensive and legitimate global vision for a more prosperous and resilient world. That vision is not without internal contradictions, but is undoubtedly a historic success of multilateralism. As such, SDGs have impressive convening power. Yet they need to be prioritised across the board instead of being a mere add-on to other policies. The spirit of the SDGs does not mesh well with business-as-usual; it requires continuous bold transformational action that does not shy away from political struggles and applies a good deal of strategising in “multilateral games”.

Therefore, SDG implementation needs to become a guiding principle of foreign policy action. The nature of the 2030 Agenda – as the global transformational agenda that legitimately sketches out what the world should look like in 2030 – calls for a innovative foreign policy: one that seeks to understand complex dynamic interactions of development and geopolitical trends, connects international and domestic action, and frames a range of tasks perceived as technical in strategic, foreign policy terms.

If the SDGs remain only a side note to multiple other imperatives of foreign affairs, this would imply significant risks and huge foregone opportunities. Foreign policy will only be sustainable if it embraces and pursues sustainability. Implementing the 2030 Agenda cannot be done without foreign policy, and foreign policy should not be done without a focus on the SDGs.

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## IV. MANAGING THE TRADE-OFFS OF TRANSFORMATION THROUGH FOREIGN POLICY

BY CLARE CHURCH (IISD), ALEC CRAWFORD (IISD) AND STELLA SCHALLER (ADELPHI)

Every change, no matter how small, can cause larger changes elsewhere. The radical transformation envisioned under the SDGs requires anticipating and managing trade-offs, and the diplomatic cadre will have a significant role to play in maximising synergies, mitigating adverse knock-on consequences and developing strategies for mutual benefit.

### INCONSISTENCIES AND TRADE-OFFS BETWEEN DIFFERENT SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS)

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development seeks to transform the global approach to development, ambitiously tackling such noble and necessary goals as the eradication of poverty, the elimination of hunger, and the provision of widespread, quality education. The 17 goals that form the core of the 2030 Agenda are themselves – by design – an integrated set of global priorities and objectives that are fundamentally interdependent; they will interact with one another.<sup>1</sup>

But the sheer scope of the agenda, and the number of goals and targets contained within it, has the potential to result in inconsistencies and trade-offs between different SDGs; progress in one area, if not carefully planned and implemented, could jeopardize the achievement of other goals. These trade-offs could occur not just across SDGs but also across borders. While UN member states have primary responsibility for their own economic and social development, the cross-boundary nature

***Approaching the SDGs as a holistic set of interacting goals will greatly increase the chances of their attainment, while reducing the risks that might otherwise arise.***

of the SDGs will require that foreign policy be used to manage the synergies and trade-offs that might occur as countries pursue achievement of the goals.

For example, the growth in demand for renewable energy technologies (SDG 7) could threaten stability in those fragile states rich in the minerals and metals required to produce them (SDG 16). Increasing trade and exports of developing countries (SDG 17) can accelerate species extinction (SDG 15) as trade in food, fibre



Achieving one SDGs can leverage gains in other fields but may also require compromises and reconciliation of competing interests.

or timber has high impacts on biodiversity.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, a failure to integrate climate action (SDG 13) into the design and implementation of international peacebuilding efforts (SDG 16) could undermine the ability of fragile states to respond to the growing threat of climate change.

SDG trade-offs such as these affect a range of core foreign policy objectives for international security, stability, and prosperity. Foreign policy can and must play a role in ensuring that transformative change is managed peacefully. Peace, in turn, is not only an SDG in itself but also an important precondition for the successful implementation of most other SDGs.<sup>3</sup>

Ending hunger, eradicating poverty and improving education will, for example, all be very difficult to achieve in a context of weak governance and fragility. Approaching the SDGs as a holistic set of interacting goals, rather than as stand-alone targets, will greatly increase the chances of their attainment, while reducing the risks that might otherwise arise. Given the focus on international peace, justice, and human rights, foreign policy experts in particular should consider these interactions, and aspire to ensure that such unintended negative impacts do not occur.



### THREE SCENARIOS: UNINTENDED IMPACTS OF SDG PROGRESS

In the implementation of the SDGs to date, positive synergies between goals have greatly surpassed any incompatibilities.<sup>4,5</sup> That said, actions toward the achievement of one goal can potentially negatively impact the attainment of other goals if they are not designed and implemented in a careful, conflict-sensitive, and fundamentally transformational way. These trade-offs and inconsistencies can occur across goals, but also within goals at the target level. Three scenarios are provided below, by no means an exhaustive list.

*States with high reliance on fossil fuel exports may experience heightened geopolitical tensions as demand wavers in the face of green energy technologies.*

achievement of other goals if they are not designed and implemented in a careful, conflict-sensitive, and fundamentally transformational way. These trade-offs and inconsistencies can occur across goals, but also within goals at the target level. Three scenarios are provided below, by no means an exhaustive list.

#### **SDG 7 for affordable and clean energy**

There is broad agreement that mitigating climate change (SDG 13) requires a shift from non-renewable energy production and consumption systems (e.g. oil, natural gas, and coal) to a cleaner, low-carbon energy mix (SDG 7). This transition will, however, have geopolitical ramifications, and if pursued in isolation could result in heightened conflicts, grievances, and tensions, undermining progress toward SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions.<sup>6</sup>



Our economies are significantly shaped by fossil fuel use, and phasing out these fuels can have profound social geopolitical implications.

For one, green energy technologies – including solar panels, wind turbines, and electric vehicles – require significant supplies of metals and minerals, including lithium, cobalt, bauxite and rare earths. More than 70 per cent of global cobalt reserves are found in states perceived to be fragile and corrupt; for rare earths, 58 and 94 per cent of reserves are found in states perceived to be fragile or corrupt, respectively.<sup>7,8,9</sup> And while increased extraction should, in a well-governed sector, support improved infrastructure, increased jobs, health, and education, the mismanagement of this transition could exacerbate existing tensions and grievances in states already struggling with fragility, corruption, and violent conflict.<sup>10</sup>

Cobalt extraction in the Democratic Republic Congo (DRC) has already been connected to incidents of child labor, extortion, human rights abuses, and dangerous working conditions.<sup>11,12</sup> In the ‘Lithium Triangle’ – the border region between Argentina, Chile, and Bolivia – increased mining operations have resulted in public demonstrations relating to water access and control, and land rights.<sup>13,14,15</sup> Zimbabwe also has significant lithium reserves – as well as a history of mining revenues being used in ways that undermine human development.<sup>16</sup> In Guinea, the mining of bauxite – a key input across green technologies – has been associated with community protests and violence.<sup>17</sup>

***More than 70 per cent of global cobalt reserves are found in states perceived to be fragile and corrupt.***

How these minerals and metals are sourced in the future will determine whether or not the low-carbon transition supports peaceful, sustainable development in mineral-rich states, or reinforces weak governance and conflict.<sup>18</sup> Voluntary and regulatory initiatives on responsible sourcing, as well as effective foreign policy, will be integral to ensuring this peaceful transition.

At the same time, states with high reserves of or reliance on the export of fossil fuel like natural gas, coal, and oil may experience heightened geopolitical tensions as demand wavers in the face of green energy technologies.<sup>19,20</sup> Fuel accounts for more than 90 per cent of total exports for Algeria, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, and Venezuela – states already struggling with high rates of fragility and conflict.<sup>21,22</sup> As the international community transitions to alternative energy sources, oil-rich countries are faced with a future in which their principal resource declines in value, and – unless they adapt to this new reality – along with it their coffers and geopolitical influence.<sup>23,24</sup>

### **SDG 12 for responsible consumption and production**

SDG 12 aims to ensure responsible consumption and production patterns. This includes promoting sustainable public procurement practices, efficiently managing natural resources, and reporting on sustainability measures – or the lack thereof – in the global supply chains.<sup>25</sup>

Section 1502 of the US Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act requires that publicly-traded companies dealing with tin, tungsten, tantalum, and gold (3TG) sourced from the DRC or adjacent countries in their supply chains take steps to ensure that the mining and trade of these minerals does not contribute to conflict. Signed in 2010, the Act in theory reinforces SDG 12 for Responsible Consumption and Production, by addressing the supply chains of 3TG and mandating reporting and responsible sourcing best practices.

In execution, many companies and investors responded to the legislation by simply not investing in the DRC altogether, threatening the livelihoods of many legitimate, safe, and responsible miners in the country. As a result, many artisanal small-scale miners and their families are now facing considerable hardships due to the widespread lack of demand for minerals from the region.<sup>26,27</sup> In some cases, miners have been forced to find other ways to survive, including joining the very

***A narrow approach to responsible consumption and production ultimately threatens decent work and peace.***

armed groups whose growth and activities Section 1502 aimed to prevent.<sup>28</sup> While well-intentioned, a narrow approach to responsible consumption and production ultimately threatened the decent work and economic growth of legitimate Congolese miners, thereby jeopardizing progress in SDG 8 for Decent Work and Economic Growth as well as SDG 16.

### SDG 13 for climate action

SDG 13 aims to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts, including targets to strengthen resilience and adaptive capacities in all countries.<sup>29</sup> It is crucial that as governments and development partners begin designing and implementing climate actions, they do so with a view toward conflict risks; by incorporating a conflict-sensitive or do-no-harm approach to climate change adaptation and mitigation projects, they can help ensure that the work they are doing does not undermine progress on peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16).<sup>30</sup>

Ensuring that a policy of minimising conflict risks and enhancing peacebuilding opportunities is integrated in climate change programming will help ensure that, for example, the distribution of the benefits of adaptation programming to a select group of beneficiaries does not lead to grievances and competition between or among communities; or that the benefits derived from a climate change action do not make a group a target for violence or theft.<sup>31</sup>

Conversely, peacebuilding and humanitarian actors must work to ensure that their interventions in pursuit of SDG 16 do not impinge upon long-term efforts to increase climate resilience in fragile states. Climate change and variability could reverse or undermine much of the progress that has been achieved in fragile states, and the changing climate is increasingly seen as a challenge to human security and a potential driver of conflict.<sup>32</sup> Fragile and conflict-affected states and societies are more likely to suffer the negative effects of climate change. Climate change acts as a threat multiplier in places where governments are already struggling to provide basic services, where populations rely on climate-dependent, resource-based livelihoods, and where there are already tensions or conflicts. Adaptation measures therefore must take into account fragility and conflict risks, while peacebuilding and conflict prevention measures need to factor in climate risks.<sup>33,34</sup>

***Adaptation must take into account fragility and conflict risks, while peacebuilding needs to factor in climate risks.***

In North Darfur, UN Environment's "Wadi El Ku Catchment Management" project demonstrated how resource management, climate, and conflict sensitivity could be integrated. Since 2003, the armed conflict in Darfur has eroded social cohesion and institutions, making it more difficult to sustainably manage natural resources and maintain livelihoods — and easier for armed groups to recruit young people. To reverse the cycle of conflict and environmental degradation, the project sought to restore safe and sustainable access to natural resources, including fresh water, for the more than 700,000 people. NGOs, national authorities and communities jointly built irrigation infrastructure, thereby increasing agricultural production without competing with other users of their shared water sources. These efforts also increased trust between groups and governance levels.<sup>35,36</sup>

## FOREIGN POLICY CAN HELP MANAGE THE SPILLOVER EFFECTS OF SDG IMPLEMENTATION

Foreign policy has a strong role to play in ensuring that the positive synergies which exist among the SDGs are promoted and enhanced, while the negative trade-offs that might emerge as a result of a siloed approach to

*Foreign policy has the unique capacity to draw on networks to generate more comprehensive knowledge on potential systemic impacts.*

SDG implementation – as illustrated in the cases above – are minimised. In cases where national efforts fail or are insufficient to reach certain SDGs, diplomacy can help by stimulating informed international action. To achieve this will require that knowledge gaps are addressed, that incentives are adopted for transform-

ative policy solutions, and that competing stakeholder interests are reconciled (see essay #3 in this volume). Foreign policy professionals could help to overcome these challenges by:

### **1 Generating, understanding, monitoring, and disseminating knowledge on the interlinkages that exist among the SDGs**

Foreign policy actors are uniquely positioned to generate, understand, monitor, and disseminate knowledge on the interlinkages between SDGs. To avoid unintended negative consequences, the SDGs must be implemented with a better understanding of their potential systemic impacts. For foreign policy makers, this means understanding and monitoring the possible spillover effects and systemic dynamics of SDG implementation on local, national, and transboundary levels. Foreign policy has the unique capacity to draw on country networks in order to generate more comprehensive knowledge on the subject. Moreover, foreign policy actors can invest in transboundary scenario planning exercises, simulating national and transboundary interactions beforehand.

Foreign policy actors are also often skilled at conducting conflict analysis. They can and should incorporate this lens to sustainable development implementation, through the promotion and adoption of a conflict-sensitive approach to the SDGs. Foreign policy actors should consider how domestic and international efforts to achieve the SDGs will impact a country's external relations and international geopolitical stability.<sup>37</sup> This information should be distributed to relevant actors – both within and beyond the foreign policy sphere.



In the Wadi El Ku, North Darfur, UN Environment works to find participative solutions to both strengthen conflict-affected communities and improve natural resource management.

## 2 Encouraging and facilitating cooperation across sectors, ministries, departments and borders

Policies must be designed to minimise inconsistencies between the SDGs and to incentivise their comprehensive implementation. Given the varied and numerous actors impacted by SDG implementation, it is essential that all relevant stakeholders – across sectors, ministries, departments, countries – be brought together to coordinate implementation of related policies, activities, and frameworks.

***There is still a dire need to advocate for, promote, and implement more radical and ambitious solutions – often against existing systemic and institutional barriers.***

With regard to international aspects, diplomats and foreign policy experts have the advantage of being able to draw on their power to bring together different ministries and departments, with the aim of working across borders and sectors. Foreign policy can create cross-sectoral and inter-agency working groups and policy processes to address the international dimension of SDGs and raise awareness on this dimension with other actors. Foreign policy experts can also help to build strong partnerships<sup>38</sup> and promote dialogue among actors to enhance their mutual trust. Encouraging and facilitating dialogue and cooperation across sectors, ministries, departments, and borders will help to better account for the cross-cutting and transboundary nature of the SDGs, and increase coordination in their implementation

### 3 Advocating and pushing for transformation in ongoing policy frameworks

Though the call for transformation is often heard, there is still a dire need to advocate for, promote, and implement more radical and ambitious solutions – often against existing systemic and institutional barriers, including siloed structures in administration, or mechanisms of funding, and short timelines for development outcomes.

***It is essential that all relevant stakeholders – across sectors, ministries, departments, countries – be brought together to coordinate SDG implementation.***

Not all unintended negative consequences of SDG implementation will emerge due to lack of knowledge or coordination. Working toward achievement of the SDGs is not simply a technical process; it is also political, and will be affected by competing interests and power dynamics. The transformative solutions that are needed for SDG implementation will depend on policymaking that acknowledges and manages these dynamics, maintains partnerships, and promotes participative and inclusive processes.

Dynamics relating to the perceived and real winners and losers of SDG implementation must be managed with both mindfulness and pragmatism.<sup>39</sup> In the case of SDG 7, the surging demand for clean energy sources will present new challenges for both energy-rich and mineral-rich states struggling with fragility and conflict. It is essential that this transition take a transformative rather than business-as-usual approach to implementation, with a particular focus on the possible governance and conflict implications of the transition to a low-carbon economy. The OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals may be considered as good practice in this regard – it does not promote avoidance of sourcing from conflict-affected and high risk areas, but instead offers comprehensive guidance for ensuring mineral sourcing that respects human rights and environmental protection.

The pursuit of the SDGs is likely to affect international politics and foreign policy, a function of the strong interconnections that exist among the goals. This is particularly true for SDG 16, as peace, justice, and strong institutions are foundational principles upon which all of the other goals are built. The 2030 Agenda can only be successfully realised through the informed and effective management of the trade-offs of SDG implementation at local, regional, national, and international levels. This process will be driven by governments themselves, but will require the support of a myriad of stakeholders, including foreign policymakers.

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## V. WORTH EVERY CENT: SMARTER APPROACHES TO ADDRESSING FRAGILITY

BY SARA BATMANGLICH (OECD)

80 per cent of the world's poorest could be living in fragile contexts by 2030, making fragility one of the capital challenges to achieving sustainable development. Fragility is multidimensional and complex, and progress in fragile contexts is not easy. But instead of shying away from this task, the ambition of the international community must be stepped up. Foreign policy can help increase the efficacy of investments to tackle fragility.

Nearly five years into Agenda 2030, 82 per cent of contexts affected by fragility are not on track to meet the development targets set by the SDGs.<sup>1</sup> On current trajectories, 80 per cent of the world's poorest could be living in fragile contexts by 2030, already making fragility one of the greatest barriers to the ambition of sustainable development.

For many years, the term “fragility” was used to denote a niche area of development cooperation that dealt with countries many people outside of that niche would have difficulty locating on a map. Unfortunately, that is no longer the case. These days, fragility no longer matters only for people living in fragile contexts, or specialists working on the topic. Fragility has now moved into the mainstream lexicon and matters for everyone.

***Fragility no longer matters only for people living in fragile contexts, or specialists working on the topic. It has now moved into the mainstream lexicon and matters for everyone.***

Why? Because newspapers everywhere are filled with headlines describing the worst manifestations of fragility: conflict, terrorism, forced displacement, homicidal violence, pandemics, extreme poverty, disasters and famine. A few stark statistics illustrating these manifestations: in 2017, the equivalent of an average of 80,000 people each day were forced to flee their homes due to conflict, violence or disasters; in 2016, global homicide rates increased for the first time since 2004 and accounted for 68 per cent of all victims of lethal violence; and the world faced the threat of four concurrent famines in South Sudan, Nigeria, Syria and Yemen.<sup>2</sup> But despite their visibility, it is not just these extreme expressions of fragility that should concern us, because beyond the shocking headlines there are many, more subtle manifestations of fragility. These are countries and contexts that may not be in crisis but lag behind on delivering equitable and sustainable development, and where there are unacceptable levels of human suffering – for instance in places such as Chad, Bangladesh, Guatemala and Burkina Faso.



Internally displaced people in Bol, in Sahelian Chad located on the coast of Lake Chad. It is projected that by 2030 more than half of the people living in poverty will be found in countries affected by high levels of violence.

Fragility has already demonstrated, with worrying and convincing force, why it has the potential to be the single biggest spoiler to the ambitions behind not just the SDGs, but also to sustaining peace, efforts to adapt to climate change, as well as other key geopolitical priorities. Addressing it must therefore be a collective priority for the development, diplomatic as well as defence communities. Smarter approaches to engaging in contexts affected by fragility, including through foreign policy channels, could help ensure that investments in tackling fragility are maximised, and worth every cent.

## WHY IS FRAGILITY SO COMPLEX AND SO IMPORTANT?

Wider awareness of the danger that fragility poses to humanity has been fostered by a wider conceptualisation of the phenomenon itself. Initial policy discussions of fragility framed it primarily as a development challenge only afflicting low-income countries, which meant an effective response was framed in terms of economic growth. This is one reason fragility initially became so grounded in development discourse alone. Indeed, it has been difficult to dispel the false notion that countries can “develop” their way out of fragility, and thus a fixation on poverty reduction as a solution to fragility remains. However, the prevalence of middle-income countries



A woman carries a basket of flowers next in Antigua, Guatemala. Fragile contexts consistently rank in the bottom third of the 157 countries for which data on SDG progress is available.

which are also fragile – in fact, over half of the 58 contexts on the OECD’s 2018 Fragility Framework are middle-income – supports the notion that there is more to fragility than economic growth and poverty,<sup>3</sup> as has the rising incidence of middle-income countries experiencing conflict.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, many countries have considerable variation of fragility within their borders, and these “pockets of fragility” – whether due to poverty, conflict, or both – demonstrate why fragility continues to confound simplistic and mono-dimensional categorisation.

***Over half of the 58 contexts on the OECD’s 2018 Fragility Framework are middle-income.***

At the same time, the popularity of the state-building agenda in the early 2000s led to a similar fixation that building state institutions would simultaneously address fragility. While formal institutions are obviously important to the effective and legitimate functioning of a state, in fragile contexts there are numerous additional forms of governance such as traditional, customary or religious governance structures that exist beyond the realm of the formal state, many of which have a profound effect on fragility. This has led to increased acceptance of the need to at the very least acknowledge, if not engage directly with, alternate sources of power in a given context, beyond central governments.

***Fragility cannot be perceived solely as an issue that development alone can address. Its multidimensionality requires equally multidimensional approaches.***

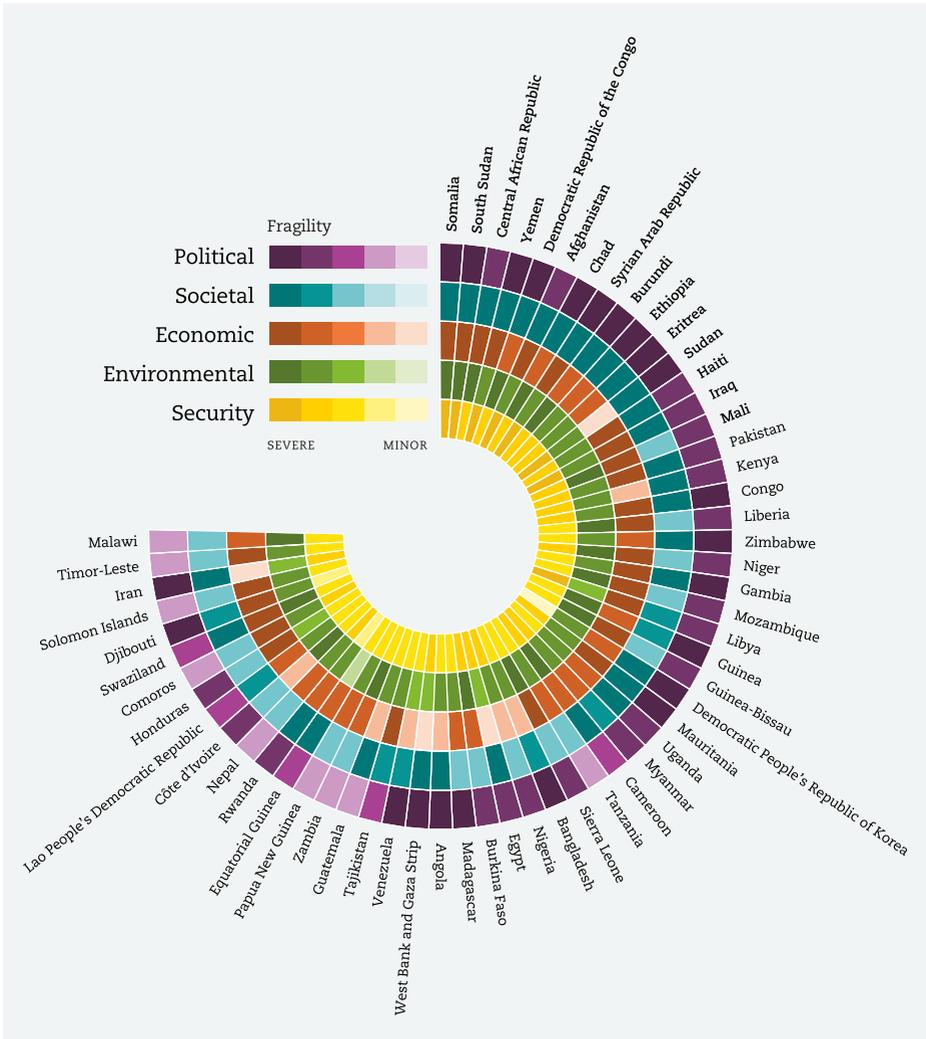
It is also important to note that while all countries experiencing conflict are certainly fragile, not all countries experiencing fragility are in conflict. And this has been yet another advancement in our understanding of fragility: that it is not synonymous with conflict. Thus, there are also contexts stuck in a fragility trap, in other words chronically fragile, with conflict no longer or perhaps never even having played a role in driving their fragility, for example, Pakistan, Guinea-Bissau, Niger and Haiti. While these places might not garner the same attention or headlines that conflict contexts do, they are still important. Not only because of the distress and hardship that people living in these places experience, but also because countries with high fragility are more vulnerable to eventually tipping into conflict or crisis, especially those that exist in tumultuous regions.

This change in understanding, and the expansion of what it means to be fragile, has resulted in the realisation of several things. First, that fragility is inherently complex and multidimensional. For instance, it cannot be assessed based on things like income-level or formal institutions alone. This is why in 2016, the OECD made the decision to stop using a Fragile States List – which in its binary format was unable to capture this complexity – and introduced instead a multidimensional fragility framework.<sup>5</sup> This framework takes into account the fact that fragility is “the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacity of the state, system and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks.” The relationship between risks and coping capacities plays out across five dimensions: economic, environmental, political, security and societal.

Secondly, this means that fragility can no longer be perceived solely as an issue which can be addressed through development alone. Its multidimensionality requires equally multidimensional approaches, bringing in a multitude of actors. And finally, this multidimensionality means that isolated and technocratic approaches will be ineffective – the politics, the role and relevance of foreign policy, in addition to geopolitical considerations in dealing with fragility are absolutely mandatory.

Figure 2

OECD FRAGILITY FRAMEWORK 2018



Source: OECD (2018), States of Fragility 2018, OECD Publishing, Paris.  
<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264302075-en>

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE AND FRAGILE CONTEXTS

A lot of money is being spent in fragile contexts and on the fallout from fragility. In 2016, donors spent USD 68.2 billion in fragile contexts compared to the USD 35.8 billion they spent in other developing countries.<sup>6</sup> Growth in official development assistance (ODA) in fragile contexts is far outstripping growth in non-fragile contexts; ODA to fragile contexts has grown 26 per cent in real terms since the end of the global financial crisis.<sup>7</sup> Yet, the majority of this growth has been due to a surge of humanitarian assistance, which increased 38 per cent from 2015 to 2016 alone. This means that a lot of the money going to fragile contexts is not actually financing sustainable development, or even being channelled to address the structural aspects of fragility, but is instead serving as a temporary sticking plaster. While keeping people alive is clearly a moral priority, unless more sustained actions are taken to shift the actual dynamics that enabled dire conditions to develop in the first place, many places will not only be caught in a fragility trap, but also a crisis trap.

***Re-evaluating risk aversion through a foreign policy framing, where risk is weighed against the interests of regional stability, is one way to push back on the disincentives of working in fragile contexts.***

It is no secret that fragile contexts face unique challenges in meeting the global development ambitions. Their poor performance on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) means that the SDG ethos of “leave no-one behind” holds particular significance for fragile contexts, which had been left behind by the MDGs. However, unfortunately several years into this new agenda and, as a group, fragile contexts are already lagging behind again. In fact, fragile contexts consistently rank in the bottom third of the 157 countries for which data on SDG progress is available.<sup>8</sup>

Achieving progress in fragile contexts is not easy. They remain the most challenging environments in which to operate. In general, programmes take longer to set up, cost more to run, and also take longer to achieve even modest results. None of this makes working in fragile contexts a very attractive business proposition. Nor does the fact that fragile contexts are by nature high-risk environments where projects have a greater likelihood of stalling or failing. This reality does not align well or incentivise engagement from increasingly risk-averse and results-oriented development actors.<sup>9</sup> However, despite these disincentives, the international community has no choice – it must not only engage in these places, but explicitly pivot towards them and adjust approaches to make them more holistic and effective. Re-evaluating risk aversion through a foreign policy framing, where risk is weighed against the interests of regional stability, for instance, is one way to push back on these disincentives and galvanise the greater action needed.<sup>10</sup>

And, despite all the aforementioned challenges, some fragile contexts indeed managed to make laudable progress on individual goals. For instance, fragile contexts such as Ethiopia and Malawi were both able to surpass their commitments on several core development areas – showing that fragility does not necessarily imply an unsurmountable barrier to progress.<sup>11</sup> But it does show that governments must truly prioritise sustainable development, and international support must encourage and provide support to this prioritisation. The additional weight of having foreign policy discourse focus on the importance of development sends a more powerful message to governments than if this message came from the development community alone. Political actors can motivate greater prioritisation of these issues, especially within countries facing competing interests, or where development might not appear as politically palatable as shorter-term priorities.

## HOW CAN FRAGILITY BE MORE EFFECTIVELY ADDRESSED?

It sounds simple, but the first step to more effectively addressing fragility is appreciating the relationship between humanitarian, development, security and governance challenges and the linkages between all layers of the global system – from the very local to the international. The SDGs provide a roadmap for collective action because they “recognise the deep complexity and interconnectedness on the path to peace and progress”.<sup>12</sup>



Accepting the prominence of fragility means also accepting that it cannot be ignored, allowed to fester or to unfold unchecked. Both development and foreign policy actors, and their counterparts and partners in fragile contexts, must be more explicit about the risks of leaving fragility unaddressed. We know for instance that when fragility tips into conflict, it does not only lead to unacceptable human costs but also severe economic ones. This means the net savings of effective conflict prevention can equal almost USD 70 billion per year.<sup>13</sup> Highlighting these potential scenarios, many of which are frightening, shines a light on the imperative for being proactive in dealing with drivers of fragility.

Part of being proactive will also be about shifting the way that financing in fragile contexts is currently structured. It is not a lack of money, per se. Afghanistan and Iraq, both received substantial development assistance from 2006-2016 (approx-

***The foundations for peaceful and stable societies can be gradually strengthened by bringing the balance back from short-term humanitarian „firefighting“ aid into longer-term assistance.***

imately USD 53 billion and USD 43 billion respectively) and both remain extremely fragile. This proves financing must be smarter. In practice it means getting four things right: (i) the amount of financing; (ii) the right financing tools; (iii) deploying finance over the right timeframe; and (iv) ensuring that it delivers the right incentives for stability.<sup>14</sup> It also means ensuring more coherence and complementarity of interventions, and

that the right financing is supported by other aspects of engagement. Thus it is mandatory that foreign and security policies, in addition to development priorities and trade policies, all work in concert and are mutually reinforcing.

Additionally, bringing the balance back from short-term humanitarian “fire-fighting” aid to longer-term assistance will allow the foundations for peaceful and stable societies to be gradually strengthened. Investments in fragile contexts also need to be better tailored to the multidimensional drivers of fragility. For instance, as of now only 2 per cent of total ODA to extremely fragile contexts, nine of which are experiencing violent conflict, was directed towards the security dimension of fragility. This contrasts directly the logic of the commonly repeated refrain, “no peace without development, no development without peace”. Likewise, only 2 per cent of the total gross ODA to fragile contexts – or about USD 1.7 billion – was dedicated to conflict prevention activities. Again, this is in direct contrast to the acknowledgment from the highest echelons of the international community that more must be done to prevent conflicts and sustain peace.

The business case for addressing fragility is clear, but the incentives to do so are still lacking. The fact remains that the sensitive and political activities, which go to the heart of the dynamics that feed fragility will not be easiest to address. It is far easier to implement traditional development programming that is considered to be

“apolitical” and solely technical in nature. But foreign policy actors have an important role to play in broadening the incentives to take on and encourage action on the more delicate issues as well. Without a focus on these, progress on stability and sustainable development will falter.

## PRINCIPLES FOR PROGRESS

Fragility is a multidimensional and complex challenge. But instead of shying away from the sheer scale of that challenge – or relegating it to something that only development can counter – the ambition of the entire international community must be stepped up. Foreign policy has a critical role to play in increasing the efficacy of investments to tackle fragility, and several principles can guide this engagement.

- 1. Pivot to prevention:** foreign policy can help incentivise the move to prevention. This is already happening in some contexts, for example in Germany where leadership comes from the Foreign Ministry. As mentioned above, prioritising prevention will not always be the most attractive or obvious choice for either international actors or governments in fragile contexts – in fact, often it will require making difficult and politically sensitive decisions that might not be popular in the short-term despite being vital in the long-term. More direct financing for preventive activities is important, but will only have limited impact if it is not accompanied by a collective political voice that firmly and consistently communicates that the 21<sup>st</sup> century has already experienced too much conflict and violence. There is a clear role for multilateralism here – to back the UN Secretary General’s prevention agenda and incentivise prevention as a common global public good – one which benefits everyone, not just the specific context at risk of conflict.
- 2. Operationalising the “nexus”:** the call for strengthened policy and operational coherence amongst international humanitarian, development and peace actors is reflected across multiple global frameworks. At the centre of strengthening coherence between these efforts is the aim of effectively reducing people’s needs, risks and vulnerabilities, and shifting from delivering aid to ending need. The OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC) recently adopted a seminal Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus, which recognises the importance of strengthening collaboration, coherence and complementarity across the respective mandates of actors within the nexus at all levels.<sup>15</sup> This requires an approach that prioritises “prevention always, development wherever possible, humanitarian action when necessary.” Foreign policy actors are crucial stakeholders in this endeavour. The centrality of sustained political dialogue, engagement and, critically, leadership will be a key feature of successful operationalisation of the nexus.

- 3. Prioritising creativity, adaptability and flexibility:** the unique needs of fragile contexts require throwing off the constraints of traditional business as usual thinking and starting with a fresh perspective. That does not mean that the wheel needs to be reinvented. But it does mean that each context, and its particular type of fragility, needs to be approached differently and on the basis of its fragility dynamics, not on what has worked elsewhere. This will mean working with the best constellation of actors based on their legitimacy and ability to positively impact the trajectory of a given place. In some contexts this might mean working more closely with non-state actors, in others it will mean focusing on municipalities and local authorities, in still others it will mean greater engagement with regional organisations and neighbours. The diplomatic toolbox will be essential to strengthen working relationships across the range of partners required for addressing fragility. In all places it will mean engaging in more flexible portfolio management based on a longer-term strategic vision, but which is adaptable to the changing needs of volatile situations.

Development cooperation has always been political to a certain extent, but it was further politicised in recent years as fragility became of greater interest to a broader spectrum of actors. This has come about due to the realisation that a stable and prosperous world is in everyone's interest – from economic, environmental, political, social and security perspectives – and thus all actors, at all levels of the international system must work together to make that vision a reality. If they do not, this current surge of crises and the existence of powerful threats call into question the future that people expect and that people deserve.<sup>16</sup> As Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel noted on the commemoration of the centenary to mark the end of World



A road in Mukono, Uganda. Shortages of water and arable land can worsen existing ethnic and political tensions or cause old animosities to flare up.

War I, “If isolationism did not provide a solution 100 years ago, then how could it today, in a world as intricately interconnected as ours.”<sup>17</sup>

The SDGs provide a clear path forward, one built on the premise of universality and shared values for people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnerships. This framework provides “the what”, but success will be determined by the “the how”, and this will necessarily look very different in fragile contexts. The principles above provide some guidance on how international engagements in contexts of fragility can be more ambitious and proactive. This is in recognition that fragility is one of the most profound challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and that the best defence against tomorrow’s conflicts and crises is to address today’s fragility.

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## VI. BEYOND RHETORIC: WHY FOREIGN POLICY NEEDS TO FOSTER PRIVATE SECTOR SDG IMPLEMENTATION

**BY BENNO KEPPNER (ADELPHI), DANIEL WEISS (ADELPHI),  
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From conflict prevention to human rights protection – companies are vital for the success of the 2030 Agenda and foreign policy alike. But progress on SDG implementation in the business world is at a turning point. Foreign policy can and must play a decisive role by building a robust knowledge base, making use of economic diplomacy instruments and bringing trade and foreign direct investment in line with the SDGs.

Central foreign policy objectives directly depend on SDG progress. This is very clear with regards to the private sector: in the globalised world economy, supply chains link one part of the world with another. As a consequence, decision-making in corporate headquarters in Europe has an impact – both negative and positive – on the environment and societies abroad. Companies are thus vital for the success of the 2030 Agenda and foreign policy alike, by contributing skills, knowledge and resources for implementation as well as running their business more sustainably.

But progress on SDG implementation in the business world is at a crossroads. While many companies began to integrate the SDGs in their business strategies and their sustainability reporting, it is now key to scale up these practices and, crucially, drive positive impact, ensuring to minimise the risks of “SDG-washing” and cherry picking. Governments need to play a stewardship role in this undertaking to help create an enabling environment in which companies embrace SDGs and focus on impact. And foreign ministries need to be at the forefront, connecting business engagement on SDGs with foreign policy objectives, streamlining SDGs in current economic diplomacy instruments and enabling corporate action through alignment of trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) with SDGs.

## THE PRIVATE SECTOR: MORE EFFORTS ARE NEEDED TO AVOID UNDERMINING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Since the 1950s, trade and foreign direct investment have significantly increased. For example, the percentage of exports of goods and services of GDP accelerated from approximately 12 per cent in the 1960s to approximately 37 per cent in 2015.<sup>1</sup> Foreign direct investment inflows have similarly risen from about USD 10 billion in the 1970s to USD 1.95 trillion in 2017.<sup>2</sup> Simultaneously, the number of multinational enterprises<sup>3</sup> (MNEs) has increased and MNEs now account for approx. 33 per cent of global gross output in 2014 (total economic activity). As a result, a web of ever more complex supply chains has emerged that links one part of the world with another.

*A web of ever more complex supply chains links one part of the world with another.*

As negative impacts of transboundary business activities on the environment and society became more apparent, the core role of the private sector for reducing these impacts became very clear. Impacts on the environment and society to a significant degree now arise at the beginning of the supply chain,<sup>4</sup> potentially affecting existing political conflicts. For example, in the German textile sector, water and land are predominantly used during the production of raw materials abroad; roughly two thirds of the water is consumed in areas experiencing water stress.<sup>5</sup> Reduced access to water resources may lead to local grievances that fuel conflicts (as was the case with water privatisation in Bolivia).<sup>6</sup> Another problematic case represents foreign direct investment in fragile contexts where companies' activities may "do harm by contributing to human rights violations, corruption and lack of trust – all of which are causes of conflict and fragility".<sup>7</sup>





Private sector is a pivotal actor in the implementation of SDGs, and is involved through manifold channels in the international processes around the 2030 Agenda. Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa, President of the Republic of South Africa, makes remarks at the UN Private Sector Forum in 2018.

In order to avoid undermining sustainable development, more awareness and increased efforts among businesses *and* governments are needed, focusing on where companies' (potential) negative impacts are most severe.<sup>8</sup>

## **THE PRIVATE SECTOR: POSITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS ARE INDISPENSABLE FOR SDG IMPLEMENTATION**

Through business activities, asset allocation and investment decisions as well as by contributing skills, knowledge, resources and transparent reporting the private sector may play a key and decisively positive role for SDG implementation.

Companies are in a unique position to implement the 2030 Agenda on the ground, for example by creating more decent jobs along the supply chain (SDG 8). Such measures would have a major global impact, considering that more than 700 million workers are employed directly and indirectly in global supply chains.<sup>9</sup>

Resources from the private sector are needed for successful SDG implementation. These comprise skills and knowledge to spur innovation as well as financial resources which should be channelled towards the SDGs rather than harmful and unsustainable activities. According to the UN Commission on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), financing the SDGs will require five to seven trillion US dollars per year,<sup>10</sup> with developing countries facing an annual gap of over two trillion US dollars.<sup>11</sup> A major influx of capital towards sustainable development could be a game changer for SDG implementation, especially since Official Development Assistance (ODA) remains low and global sustainable investment remains a niche.<sup>12,13</sup>

***Resources from the private sector are needed for successful SDG implementation.***

The engagement of the private sector in SDG implementation is not only positive for sustainable development but also for the companies. Integrating the SDGs in business strategies opens companies to new markets and business opportunities estimated at 12 trillion US dollars just for four SDGs (food and agriculture, cities, energy and materials, and health and well-being) which could also create 380 million jobs.<sup>14</sup> For example, developing new technologies to prevent food waste losses occurring during harvesting would help reduce pressure on the environment as well as open up markets in developing countries where post-harvest losses often occur (e.g. in India and Rwanda).<sup>15</sup>



## SDG IMPLEMENTATION IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR – FROM AWARENESS AND ENGAGEMENT TO IMPACT

While private sector awareness and engagement is indispensable for SDG implementation, it currently does not live up to its potential.

On a very basic level, the SDGs can be regarded a success story for private sector engagement. Many multinational companies now publicly acknowledge the SDGs, due in part to the fact that the business world was integrated by means of the post-2015 business engagement architecture and had a voice in the form of a major group (“business and industry”) in the intergovernmental negotiations leading to the 2030 Agenda.

The interest in SDGs by the private sector is observable in numerous initiatives, which provide tools, outreach material and engage in dialogue on specific SDGs and crosscutting issues such as indicators and benchmarking. For example, the “Business Call to Action” encompasses 230 companies in 70 countries and aims to strengthen private sector SDG implementation.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, from a foreign policy perspective, these initiatives and contributions directly address business activities and impacts abroad and connect SDGs with establishing sustainable

***The number of companies integrating SDGs in their business strategies has increased in the past two years.***

supply chains. For example, in the SDG compass, a leading tool created by the World Business Council on Sustainable Development (WBCSD), UN Global Compact and GRI (Global Reporting Initiative), private sector implementation implies “understanding the SDGs”, “defining priorities”, “setting goals” and “integrating”. Priorities are to be defined by “map[ping] the value chain to identify impact areas.” In the section on “understanding the SDGs”, the compass also links private sector SDG implementation with compliance of, among others, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the UN Global Compact Principles, which address some of the negative impacts that arise in the supply chain.

Also, the number of companies integrating SDGs in their business strategies has increased in the past two years.<sup>17</sup> This encompasses major companies from those sectors particularly relevant to trade and FDI related externalities (e.g. the textile, food and mining sectors).

Nevertheless, when looking in more detail at the current progress with regard to private sector implementation, it becomes apparent that further efforts are needed to create impact, i. e. protecting the environment, fostering human rights and helping create more equitable and inclusive societies wherever companies operate.



Rag pickers search for recyclable material in the garbage in Amravati, Maharashtra (India), in 2014.

**From “SDG-referencing” to additional action:** Firstly, notwithstanding some “best practice cases”, a big pending question is whether the SDGs guide business action and lead to additional measures at a company level. For example, a survey of 250 larger companies across sectors and continents found that 44 per cent merely reflect on the positive relationship between SDGs and their corporate strategy, while 41 per cent took concrete measures to integrate SDGs in their company; some companies do not yet take the framework into account, and some have just begun to think about SDGs.<sup>18</sup> With regard to reporting, companies differ in how they take the SDGs into account: some only mention them, others relate them to existing strategies. Furthermore, small and medium size companies are very reluctant to adopt or implement the SDGs.

Companies are primarily interested in SDGs as the framework helps them structure their existing sustainability approach, and committing to it is expected to improve corporate image and render competitive advantages.<sup>19</sup> They to a larger degree focus on the positive impact of the SDGs, usually within their “direct operations” rather than the wider supply chain.<sup>20</sup> They are also more interested in the general SDG “themes” or goals, and focus less on specific targets.<sup>21</sup>

Very importantly, from a foreign policy perspective, this means that current links to themes with high priority (such as FDI in fragile contexts) have often not yet been made. In principle, companies serious about reporting should assess impacts where they occur, i.e. also in the supply chain. However, this understanding is not yet part of the mainstream – the implementation is still at a very basic level where, to use an image, flow diagrams indicate that SDGs are somehow addressed.

#### **From cherry picking and “SDG-washing” to impact-based prioritisation of SDGs:**

Secondly, most companies also engage in prioritisation of SDGs, selecting a subset of SDGs for their engagement. MNEs in particular prioritise implementing SDGs which are related to their core business activities and internal processes.<sup>22</sup> This is also visible in the SDGs favoured by businesses: According to the 2018 United Nations Global Compact Progress Report, in the past two years the top three SDGs respondent companies target were SDG 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth, SDG 5 on Gender Equality and SDG 3 on Good Health and Well-Being.<sup>23</sup> Companies in consumer-facing sectors are more prone to address SDGs than companies in heavy industry sectors.<sup>24</sup> Companies focus more on the

***There are risks of “cherry picking”, where companies select the most relevant and “easiest” SDGs, and of “SDG-washing”, where companies mainly use the framework for public relations, concentrating on positive contributions.***

SDGs to which they can directly relate (such as economic growth), less on the ones their activities affect indirectly (poverty, inequality).<sup>25</sup> There are also regional differences: in BRICS countries, for example, MNEs focus more on SDG 9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure.<sup>26</sup> Companies also tend to favour some SDGs among others according to their PR-strategy or depending on the profitability of the investment. A business might be more inclined to finance projects in infrastructure rather than community-based social services. Companies also tend to be more willing to participate in additional projects rather than adjusting their business strategy to the SDGs.<sup>27</sup>

Prioritisation is necessary as the SDGs encompass such a wide array of different goals and targets, and action should focus on the “big points”. Nevertheless, companies are still very reluctant to prioritise measures according to their impacts on the SDGs and many also do not provide enough information on how and why they select the SDGs.<sup>28</sup> There is hence currently the risk of cherry picking, when companies select SDGs according to whether they are relevant to them and “easiest”,<sup>29</sup> and also of “SDG-washing”, where companies mainly use the framework as a PR tool and solely “report on positive contributions”.<sup>30</sup>

From a foreign policy perspective, this is very problematic as it means those SDGs which are of great concern (e. g. 1, 2, 13, 14, 15, 16) risk being left out. To put it differently: the problem is how to prioritise. More effective due diligence processes, based on the UN Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights and the OECD

Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, are needed for companies to prioritise efforts on the most severe negative impacts and the most promising contributions they can make.<sup>31</sup>

#### **From low to high corporate integration – building a “foreign policy” business case:**

Thirdly, from an institutional perspective, the SDGs currently do not permeate all units of the committed companies. Mostly, sustainability departments are tasked with implementation, followed by communication departments and CEOs.<sup>32</sup> Several challenges remain, including making the “business case” for SDGs, helping understand how SDGs relate to current regulation, adding benchmarks to the SDGs and connecting them with data from the companies. This is in part a knowledge problem – what would be helpful is to outline from a foreign policy perspective how e. g. conflict-sensitivity helps to increase business performance.

***Private sector implementation is at a crossroads: while important steps have been taken, more is needed to create additional impact. There is a real risk that instead of transformative activities, more business-as-usual is taking place.***

In sum, private sector implementation is at a crossroads: while important steps have been taken, more is needed to create additional impact. There is a real risk that instead of transformative activities, the reality is more business as usual.<sup>33</sup> But there is also room for hope: “SDG front-runner” companies do exist. Occasionally private sector’s commitment to the 2030 Agenda goes beyond governments and legal obligations, taking the lead to tackle social or environmental challenges (e. g. the campaign against a hydropower dam in the Balkan region).<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, SDGs are a suitable platform for a more thorough discourse within companies and between companies, civil society and governments. A positive development in this regard is the establishment of the World Benchmarking Alliance, which intends to “measure and incentivise business impact” on SDGs; the initiative could help in inducing a market-driven race to the top.<sup>35</sup>

## **BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT ON THE SDGS AS A FOREIGN POLICY GAME CHANGER? POTENTIAL AREAS OF ACTION**

The analysis so far has made the case for increased presence of foreign ministries in current discussions on SDG implementation in the private sector. As outlined before, key foreign policy objectives are concerned. Furthermore, the SDGs also provide a good entry point to discuss with companies their activities, whether current commitment is enough to meet the vision of the Agenda 2030 (additionality) and how they should focus on specific SDGs (such as inequality, poverty, human rights violations). Foreign policy should use the opportunity to contribute to the discussion to push themes such as fragility and private sector impact on conflict and cooperation.



While global supply chains are efficient, they also bear significant risks of supply shocks. These shocks need to be gradually reduced through sustainable trade and investment promotion. Here, foreign policy must engage with the private sector.

Three areas of action warrant specific attention from foreign ministries:

### **1 Connect business engagement on the SDGs with foreign policy objectives**

In order to manoeuvre successfully in the political arena, it would be very beneficial to build a knowledge base, linking SDG-related business activities with foreign policy objectives. Data could e.g. come from CDP and sustainability reporting in general. However, this data is not yet connected comprehensively either to the SDGs (and targets and indicators) or to foreign policy objectives. An important first exercise would thus be to identify priority areas in the private sector with larger impacts on SDGs (e.g. food sector, textile sector, IT-sector) to compile data on sustainability-related activities by companies in this sector and to relate this data to foreign policy objectives. One interlinkage could be conflict models, to see how the private sector impacts conflict level. Such an endeavour could also build on the data currently compiled as part of the monitoring exercise of the National Action Plans on Business and Human Rights.

This would provide for a very powerful argument why foreign ministries need to engage in the discourse and also help understand what activities to undertake. Importantly, this would be a major leverage point to engage businesses further.

## 2 Streamline SDGs in current economic diplomacy instruments

It is crucial that foreign ministries support private sector SDG implementation through economic diplomacy instruments such as business delegations, chambers of commerce and German embassies in host countries (similar to the energy export initiative, which supports primarily SMEs in the areas of renewable energy and energy efficiency).

One important area would be to highlight the “blind spots”, that is e. g. that SDG prioritisation in fragile contexts necessarily involves looking at negative impacts on SDG 16 as well as SDG 10 and the environmental SDGs (e.g. with regard to water and land grabbing). In other words, foreign ministries should use the SDGs as another means to induce conflict-sensitive business activities. Foreign ministries should also provide guidance, especially with regard to how SDGs are interlinked with other processes, such as the National Action Plans on Business and Human Rights and the G20 Compact for Africa.

## 3 Enable corporate action on SDGs through alignment of trade and FDI to SDGs

SDGs resonate well with businesses and trade, and FDI play a major role in achieving sustainable development for all in a globalised economy. The 2030 Agenda provides a consistent framework on which foreign ministries can rely to foster sustainable development through trade and FDI. On the one hand, the worlds biggest economies such as Germany, should use their leverage to ensure that trade policies support SDG implementation. On the other hand, through the promotion of foreign trade instruments like Hermes guarantees, foreign ministries should encourage private actors to integrate sustainable development and human rights in their business activities throughout the world. One angle would be to connect private sector SDG implementation with already existing criteria for foreign direct investment, such as the OECD guidelines for FDI<sup>36</sup> which call for “carry[ing] out human rights due diligence as appropriate to their size, the nature and context of operations and the severity of the risks of adverse human rights impacts”.

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# CONCLUSIONS

**BY ALEXANDER CARIUS (ADELPHI) AND DARIA IVLEVA (ADELPHI)**

In 2015, in face of enormous converging challenges, the international community agreed on a joint framework for a far-reaching global transformation, calling for simultaneous progress on all three dimensions of sustainability – the economy, ecology and social justice. The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and its 17 sustainable development goals set out a pathway for change indispensable to preparing the world for a resilient future. Over three years down the road, the speed of transformation is lagging, with the weakness of some of the frameworks – such as monitoring gaps and lack of enforcement mechanisms – coming to bear. The current international political climate also raises serious and urgent questions as to how progress under a framework born of broad support by all states and many non-governmental stakeholders can survive the current geopolitical flux.

Without invested international leadership we will not be able to achieve the SDGs. Without the transformation that the SDGs aim for, international peace cannot be secured in the long-term. The world is balancing on the verge of an environmental disaster. The window to avert catastrophic change in global climate and to protect soils, fresh water and biodiversity is rapidly closing. Yet the international community seems to be gradually stripping itself of the only meaningful instrument to save the day: multilateral structures hard-won over the course of the last hundred years. This must and can change.

The 2030 Agenda is a unique accomplishment of multilateralism and the protection of global commons that foreign policy must help carry forward and can use to work towards its core objectives, most importantly, guarding international peace and stability. This essay series highlights some of the action areas for foreign policy:

## **Steer**

Foreign policy should actively support the SDGs and spearhead international action to implement them as the goals offer the best currently available structure to approach the complexity of global change in a cooperative manner. We need to keep sustainable development high on the agenda and rally political will at all governance levels behind the 2030 Agenda, as the time to deliver on some of its dimensions is running out. The transformative character of the SDGs and related sustainable development pathways will substantially shape the design of and power in the international system. As traditional power structures erode and change, with fossil based economies becoming carbon neutral, their relative power – globally and regionally – may change. This requires increasingly smart diplomacy to steer the political process of transformative change over the decades to come.

### Possible foreign policy initiatives

- A joint **G7 and G20 statement** on the geopolitics of sustainable development should highlight the importance of multilateralism for the 2030 Agenda and the need for sustainable development to avert international crises.
- **Setting up a “Sustainable Foreign Policy Initiative”** to mobilise diplomatic networks across the globe in order to make the 2030 agenda a centre piece of foreign affairs. Such an initiative needs to work with SDG focal points in diplomatic missions, coordinate with regional organisations, engage with local civil society and the private sector, and ensure that the SDGs are high on the agenda of foreign policy and in multilateral fora.
- Support countries in the implementation of the **SDGs, particularly in fragile contexts**. Since SDGs can play a crucial role in building and sustaining peace and stability, pilot programmes should explore the specific means and conditions under which the 2030 Agenda contributes to resilient structures in society and at a state level.
- A **portfolio analysis** of foreign ministries should highlight how guidelines, strategies, initiatives and workflows in foreign policy interact with the SDGs, and where the entry points are to truly align foreign policy action with the vision of the 2030 Agenda.

### Understand

Implementing the 2030 Agenda will change both local conditions and international politics, altering geopolitics as new players evolve and resource flows shift. The process will be complex, highly political and require a sound analysis of barriers, interlinkages and possible knock-on effects. Foreign policy needs to understand these dynamics and monitor how they change national and international conditions around the globe. It also needs to support closing knowledge and data gaps that still persist with regard to tailor-made, do-no-harm sustainability solutions in every specific context, especially in contexts of fragility and humanitarian vulnerability.

**Balance**

SDGs, while a remarkably comprehensive framework, are also prone to trade-offs, and implementing some of the goals may lead to unintended negative consequences for others. At the same time, many sustainable development solutions are synergistic and benefit several SDGs. This, however, always depends on the specific context and more often than not likely breaks with existing patterns and approaches. Foreign policy should support the implementation of the SDGs as an integrated vision and overcome political barriers in the way of making this huge leap away from business as usual possible. This is true where the implementation of the SDGs is reshaping the global power balance and particularly relevant to the implementation of the SDGs in fragile contexts.

**Guide**

Foreign policy has a core role to play in making sure that much-needed development programming and investment are conflict-sensitive and emphasise conflict prevention. This can often be achieved only with the strategic guidance of foreign policy and cannot be delivered through “technical” fixes, for instance, if regional power balance or rights of local populations are at stake. Based on careful case-by-case analysis and integrated thinking mentioned above, foreign policy should guide mindful, politically viable SDG implementation. Furthermore, foreign ministries should proactively use their funds to initiate and focus on programmes and activities to catalyse and accompany global sustainable transformation along the vision of the 2030 Agenda.

**Convene**

Finally, foreign policy needs to mobilise its forces for SDG implementation, doing what it does best: bringing actors together and forging innovative coalitions, raising awareness and creating consensus for sustainable development, connecting the dots in different areas of external relations and carefully negotiating solutions that can bring often adverse stakeholder interests on board. This means reaching out to new partners, for example, helping align private sector endeavours with the vision of the SDGs.

Transforming a world as interconnected as ours in such broad and deep ways as mandated by the 2030 Agenda is simply not possible without proactive and continuous diplomacy. With this essay series we hope to have delivered first entry points for a sustainable foreign policy that can deliver on the SDGs.

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